

BATOUALA

René Maran



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Batouala

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Batouala was awarded the
Prix Goncourt, 1921

Batouala

A Negro Novel from the French of
René Maran



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ENGLISH PUBLISHER'S NOTE

“**B**ATOUALA,” which gained the Goncourt Prize in 1921, is a genuine picture of negro life in the French Congo. If some passages here and there appear a little outspoken to English taste, they form nevertheless an integral part of this authentic portrayal of negro manners.

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P R E F A C E

HENRI DE RÉGNIER and Jaques Boulenger, begetters of this my work, I should be wanting in gratitude if I did not express in the very first lines of my preface, my recognition of what I owe to your encouragement and advice.

You know how much I crave success for this novel. It is, indeed, merely a succession of strong drinks. But it has taken six years to complete. It has taken me six years to translate into it what I heard out there, and what I saw.

In the course of those six years' work I have not yielded once to the temptation to put in a word of my own. I have preserved the objective attitude so conscientiously that all reflections have been suppressed which could possibly be attributed to me, for the negroes of Equatorial Africa are indeed brute simple. Devoid of critical faculty, they have not, they never will have, any kind of intelligence. At least, so it is said. Doubtless wrongly, for if

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the negro possessed intelligence, there would be very few Europeans there.

Therefore this novel is entirely objective. It does not even attempt explanation : it is a witness. It does not criticize, it registers. I could not do otherwise. On moonlight nights, from my long chair on the veranda, I listened to this poor folk's talk. Their jokes were proof of resignation. They suffered, and laughed at suffering.

Ah, Mr. Burel ! from crafty ill-digested statistics you have been able to state that the population of *Oubangui-Chari* had risen to the number of 1,350,000 inhabitants. But why did you not mention that in a certain little village of *Ouahm* in 1918 there numbered only 1,080 souls as against 10,000 in the previous census, seven years ago ? You have enlarged on the wealth of this immense tract. Why did you not say that famine reigned there ?

I understand. What does it matter to Sirius if ten, or even a hundred, natives, in a day of unmeasured distress, sought nourishment in undigested grains of maize and meal out of horse-dung—dung from the horses of their pretended benefactors ?

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Montesquieu was right when he wrote in words beneath whose cold irony vibrates deep indignation : " They are black from head to foot. Their nose is so flattened, it is almost impossible to pity them."

After all, if they perish of hunger by thousands like flies, it is because their land is being " worked." Let those die who cannot adapt themselves to civilization.

O Civilization, Civilization, pride of Europeans and charnel-house of innocents, you were well described one day, at Tokyo, by the Hindu poet Rabindranath Tagore.

Your kingdom is built on corpses. Whatever you purpose, whatever you do, you wallow in lies. Your approach springs a well of tears, rouses cries of pain. You are Might, beheading Right. You are not a torch, you are a devastating fire. You consume whatever you touch. . . .

O my brother writers of France, the honour of my country to which I owe everything, writers for all parties, whenever it is a case of fighting for a just and noble idea, I call on you, for I have faith in your great-heartedness. You, who often fight

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over nothing, who tear one another to pieces, and are suddenly reconciled.

My book is not a polemic. It comes, by chance, at its appointed time. The negro question is a living one. America has made it so. And the newspaper campaigns beyond the Rhine ; and Romulus Coucou and Paul Reboux ; the *Visage de la Brousse* of Pierre Bonardi, and poor Combette's *l'Isolement*. And was it not you *Eve*, inquisitive little woman, at the beginning of this year when you were still a daily paper, who made inquiries as to whether a white woman might marry a negro ?

Since then, in the *Revue* Jean Finot has published articles on the employment of black troops, and Dr. Huot devoted some pages to them in the *Mercure de France*. Since then, *Les Lettres* have declared their martyrdom, in the United States. Finally, in the course of a speech in the chamber, Mr. Andre Lefevre, Minister of War, was not afraid to say that certain French officials in reconquered Alsace-Lorraine thought they could behave as though they were in French Congo.

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Words such as these, uttered on such an occasion, are significant. They reveal simultaneously, first, that what goes on in those distant lands is known, and secondly that there has been up to now no attempt to remedy the abuse, the malpractices and the atrocities which flourish there. Furthermore, Mr. Diague affirms that "the best settlers there have proved to be, not the professional colonials, but the European troops from the trenches."

Brother authors, writers of France, this is only too true. That is why, henceforward, it behoves you to signify that you do not wish your compatriots out there, under any pretext, to discredit the nation you uphold.

Raise your voice ! You will surely support those who describe things as they are, not as one would wish them to be. Later, when the colonial stain has been washed away, I will paint a few of the types I have already sketched in my note-books, but which I have laid aside for a time.

I must tell you that in certain districts unhappy negroes have been forced to sell as slaves their women at a price varying

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from 25 to 65 francs apiece. . . . I must tell you—but then I should be speaking in *my* name, and not in another, and exposing *my* ideas. And I know beforehand that the Europeans I have in mind are so cowardly, not one of them would dare utter the faintest denial.

If we knew of what daily disgraces the great colonial life was composed, we would talk less of the life, we would be silent on the subject. Even amongst the officials, the colonial with any pretence at cultivation is rare. He cannot resist his surroundings. He takes to drink. Before the war there were numberless Europeans capable of absorbing, on their own, more than five litres of *pernod* in a month. Since the war, alas ! I have known a man who has beaten all records. In a month he consumed eighty bottles of whisky at a stretch.

This, and other forms of ignoble excess, reduce men to the most abject state of debility. Alarm on this account can only be raised by those who are empowered to represent France. They are responsible for the evils from which certain tracts of

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the negro country are suffering, at this very time. *But*, if they want promotion, they must not have "any tales" to report. Haunted by this idea, they have abandoned all pride, they have hesitated, temporized, lied, and withheld information. They have been blind. They have not had the pluck to speak out. And this moral asthenia, added to intellectual anæmia, has made them cheat their country without remorse.

I call you to redress all that which administration included in the euphemism "mistakes." It will be a hard fight. The "nigger-drivers" will take affront. It is a tough job. To work, without more delay! it is the will of France!

The action of this novel takes place in *Oubangui-Chari*, one of the four colonies attached to the General Government of Equatorial French Africa.

It is bounded on the south by the *Oubangui*, on the east by the dividing line of the Congo-Nile, on the north and west by the waters of the Congo and the *Chari*. It is divided—like all the colonies of the group—into districts and subdivisions.

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A district is an administrative entity, corresponding to a department. Its subdivisions are under sub-prefects.

The *Kémo* district is one of the most important in *Oubangui-Chari*. If the famous railway were worked which is always talked of, and never begun, it is likely that *Fort-Sibut*, headquarters of the district, would grow into a capital.

The *Kémo* has four subdivisions: *Fort-de-Posset*, *Fort-Sibut*, *Dekou* and *Grimari*. The natives know them only under the names of *Kémo*, *Krébedgé*, *Com-bélé* and *Bamba*. The site of the *Kémo* district is about 190 kilometres north of *Bangui*, the capital of *Oubangui-Chari*, where the number of Europeans has never exceeded 150 souls.

The subdivision of *Grimari* (otherwise the *Bamba* or the *Kandjia*, from the twin names of the river on which the Government settlement is established) is about 120 kilometres east of *Krébedgé*.

The region was thickly populated, and very rich in rubber. It was covered with various plantations, overflowing with poultry and kids.

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In seven years it has become utterly ruined. The villages have become fewer, the plantations have vanished, kids and hens have been destroyed. As to the natives, they have been demoralized by incessant overwork, ill-rewarded, and rendered incapable of devoting even the bare time necessary to their land. Sickness visits them, famine ravishes them, and their numbers diminish.

And yet they are the offspring of a robust and warlike tribe, tough and enduring. They could not be destroyed either by enemy forages, nor by perpetual internal dissensions. Their family name was a guarantee of their vitality, for were they not the *Bandas*? Did not *Banda* mean "net"? For at the seasons when the horizon blazes with bush-fires, they hunted by means of nets.

Civilization has passed this way. There has been universal destruction: *dakpas*, *dacpas*, *m'bis*, *maroubas*, *langbassis*, *saban-gas* and *nagapous*—all the *Banda* tribes have been mown down. . . .

The *Grimari* subdivision is fertile, stocked with game, and picturesque. Wild bulls

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and *phacocères* breed there, as well as guinea-fowl, partridges and turtle-doves.

It is watered on all sides by streams. The trees are stunted and sparse, for the equatorial torrents stop at *Bangui*. Beautiful trees are not to be found except along forest glades by the water.

The rivers wind amongst hills which the *Bandas* call *kagas*.

The three *kagas* nearest *Grimari* are : the *Kosségamba*, the *Gobo* and the *Biga*. The first of these stands two or three kilometres south-west of the station, and bounds the valley of the *Bamba* in that direction. The *Gobo* and the *Biga* are in *N'Gapou* country, twenty kilometres north-west of this. . . .

This is a brief description of the scene of this objective drama.

And now, as Verlaine said at the close of his Saturnalian poems : " Now, my book, follow the finger of fate."

BORDEAUX.

November 5, 1920.

CHAPTER ONE

THE customary fire kindled at evening has burnt out during the night, leaving a great heap of hot cinders. The circular wall of the hut perspires. A dim light filters through the hole serving as door. Beneath the thatch sounds continuously the rustling of white ants. In shelter of their brown earthen runs they search among the branches of low roofing, which offer protection against both rain and sun.

Outside the cocks crow. The sound of their *kékérékés* mingles with the bleating of kids soliciting their dams; it mingles with the screeching of horn-bills; and, over there, in the depths of thick vegetation bordering the banks of the *Pombo* and the *Bamba*, with the hoarse cry of *bacouyas*, monkeys with elongated dog-like muzzles.

Day comes.

Still drugged by sleep, the chief Batouala—Batouala, the *mokoundji* of so many villages—was yet conscious of all these sounds.

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He was yawning, shivering, and stretching, uncertain whether to go to sleep again or to get up.

Get up, O N'gakoura ! Why get up ? He did not even wish to know why, disdainful alike of excessively simple and excessively complex resolutions.

Yes, and even to get up, must not an enormous effort be made ? The resolution in itself seemed simple enough. To carry it out was difficult, for waking and work meant one and the same thing, for white men, at all events.

It was not that work bothered him much. Sturdy, big-limbed, excellent walker, he was unrivalled in spear-throwing and knife-throwing, in running and wrestling.

His legendary prowess was renowned from one end to the other of the vast *Banda* land. His exploits in love or war, his skill as a valiant hunter, were becoming immortalized in an atmosphere of prodigies. And when Ipen, the moon, was climbing the sky, in their distant villages *m'bis*, *dacpas*, *dakonas* and *langbassis* would sing the prowess of the great *mokoundji* Batouala, whilst the discordant sounds of *balafous*

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and *koundés* united with the tom-tom of *li'ughas*.

So work could not scare him.

But then, in the language of white men, this word assumed an astonishing significance. It meant fatigue without producing any immediate or tangible result, it meant worry, sorrow, pain, the consumption of health, the pursuit of imaginary ends.

Ah, those white men! They had far better go home, all of them. They had far better limit their ambition to domestic pursuits and the cultivation of their own land, instead of trying to acquire useless money.

Life is short. Work is for those who will never comprehend it. Loafing does not degrade to a man of clear sight. It differs from laziness. Until it was proven otherwise he, Batouala, would believe that to do nothing was simply to benefit by one's surroundings. To live from day to day, without remembering yesterday, without worrying about to-morrow, without forethought—that was perfect.

After all, why get up? It was better to sit than stand up, better to lie down than be sitting.

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The mat on which he rested gave out a sweet odour of dried herbs. The hide of a newly killed wild ox could not be more supple.

Therefore, instead of dozing there with closed eyes, why did he not try to sleep again? Then he would be capable of enjoying to the full the springy perfection of his *bogbo*.

First of all he must revive the fire.

A few twigs of dead wood and a little straw would suffice. With inflated cheeks he would blow the cinders where sparks were smouldering. Soon, amidst crackling, the strong, suffocating smoke would unfurl in spirals. Then flames, leaping upwards, would herald the sure invasion of heat.

In the warm hut, stretched out like a *phacochère*, with his back to the fire, he could first go to sleep again. He had nothing to do but to warm himself before the glow like an iguana in the sun. Nothing to do but follow the example of the *yassi* with whom he had been living now for so long.

It was an excellent example. Peaceful, naked, her head propped against a log, her

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hands on her stomach, her legs apart, she was snoring *gologolo*, leaning against a hearth extinct like herself.

What a good sleep she was having ! Now and again she touched her breasts, limp, flaccid, like leaves of dried tobacco ; she scratched herself with great sighs. Her lips moved. She sketched a gesture. Then calm was restored, and her even snores . . .

Curled up on a pile of rubber baskets in a hole amongst the faggots—dominating hens, ducks, and kids—snoozed Djouma, the sad little russet-coloured dog.

Of his meagre starved body only the ears were visible, upright, pointed, alert. Now, worried by flea or tick, he would shake them. Again, he would growl, without moving any more than Yassi-Guindja, the favourite *yassi* of his master, Batouala the *mokoundji*. Or yet again, visited by some mocking dream, he would yap at space, and challenge the silence with stifled barks.

Batouala was leaning on his elbows. Really it was impossible to try and sleep. Everything was in league against his rest. Fog was drizzling into the opening of the

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hut. It was cold. He was hungry. Day was breaking.

Besides, where and how could he sleep? Outside, in the damp and tufted grass, hammer-tree-frogs, buffalo-toads and bull-frogs croaked in competition. Around him, in spite of the cold, and because the dead fire no longer gave off bewildering smoke, *fourous* and mosquitoes droned and droned. And—well, if the kids had gone off at cock-crow, the hens remained, making a hideous noise.

Even the ducks, the placid ducks, congregating round their leader, stretched their necks to the left, drew them in to stretch out again, bowed them down, threw them back—all chuckling in astonishment.

It seemed as though a phenomenon had occurred, more extraordinary than all the phenomena yet known to ducks. They moved their tails, and commented loudly, seeking to right, to left, questioning each other.

When they thought they had found the object of their search—solemn, important, awkward, following each behind the other in order of height, they made a round of

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the rubber baskets, each executing the same manœuvres.

With every step of their swaying promenade, the weight of their throats pitched them slightly forward.

“*Cahin-caha*,” they called a council in a corner. At intervals they looked anxiously in the direction of the entrance.

Suddenly one of them made a decision. She took five or six steps towards the faintly luminous entrance—she nervously beat the ground with her wings to give her a spring, leaped at the opening, and disappeared.

The others at once imitate her.

And now, the sad little russet dog Djouma must wake up.

It is not the noise that disturbed him. He has been accustomed to that for so many moons.

Even in the days of his mother, who had been eaten by his masters, each morning brought the same uproar.

Beasts and men are too often obliged to sleep under the same roof. It would be difficult for things to happen otherwise.

Nevertheless, at first, life had seemed to

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him painful. He was so little aware of his duty as a dog that he neglected to bark at every footstep.

He had had to suffer the cruelties of Batouala and the rebuffs of Yassiguindja. The cunning hostility of the kids, combined with the scared officiousness of the birds, had almost driven him mad.

In reaction, he was as snappish as could be. The slightest call on him roused defiance, if not an immediate disappearance. So intelligent had he grown through fear of kicks, that he took flight at every sight of a white man.

So if he awoke, it was not because he was disturbed, nor was it because he had slept long enough.

One never sleeps enough. On this point he shared the views of Batouala, his master.

He woke up, because he must.

Truly, in the life of a *mokoundji*, as in the life of any man, a dog counts no more than do the neighings of a *m'barta*.

What's a dog? One beats it to death, one eats it, or one castrates it, one cuts off its ears! What can a dog do? It is less than useless. One makes a certain use of

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it in the season of thicket fires. It excels in pursuit of dislodged game. But otherwise, as it is useless, one does not bother about it.

It was a long time since all the ways of men had become well known to Djouma, the little russet dog. A long time since he had realized that if he stayed at home and had a lazy morning, no one would bring him food.

That is why he got up. Did he not know that at dawn it is a good plan to gobble up the goat's dung? It still tastes of milk. A succulent meal, which seems all the more so to a dog who has nothing else to chew.

There would surely be some dung. It was still too chilly for the dung-flies to have started work. What joy! he might even, if luck favoured him, smell out a guinea-fowl's egg in his meanderings. But one must not count on that. . . .

Sitting up, Djouma licked his stomach and his paws, sneezed vigorously, hunted for fleas. Then, his tail between his legs, his muzzle skimming the ground, cringing and miserable, he dragged himself shakily to the door.

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Having learned to dissimulate his slightest sentiments, he feigned the infinite lassitude of limitless boredom. Any sprightliness on his part might have inspired Batouala to follow him. And this must not occur. For if it did, farewell any chance booty.

Batouala was thinking. Djouma, the hens, the ducks and the kids had gone. He felt he must follow their example. And then, there was this celebration of the circumcision. He had as yet invited no one. It was time he made up for this neglect.

When he had rubbed his eyes with his fists and blown his nose through his fingers, he got up, scratching. He scratched his armpits, his thighs, his head, his buttocks, his arms. Scratching is good exercise. It whips up the circulation. It is at once a pleasure and a symbol of awakening.

One has only to look about. Every animal scratches when it wakes up. The example is good, since it is a natural function. He who does not scratch is not properly roused.

But if scratching is good, yawning is

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better. It is a way of expelling sleep through one's mouth.

One can easily account for this supernatural manifestation. On cold days does not every one breathe out a sort of smoke? Amongst other things this proves that sleep is a species of secret fire. For Batouala this was a certainty. He knew it. A sorcerer is infallible. And since his old father had conveyed his power to him, Batouala was a sorcerer, he was N'gakoura.

Besides, consider this : if sleep is not an inward fire, whence comes the smoke? Who ever saw smoke without a fire? He was prepared for contradictory arguments, which would certainly be queer ones.

Yawning and scratching are matters of minor importance. While performing these functions Batouala eructated violently. It was an old custom, learned from his parents, who had learned it from theirs.

Old customs are best. They cannot be too carefully observed. They are founded on experience.

So thought Batouala. He was the guardian of old customs, and remained faithful to the legacy of his people.

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He delved no deeper than that. All arguments are powerless as against custom. . . .

Yes, he must soon let his friends know where and when the feast of circumcision would take place. For the moment he was content to revive the only fire which could warm his sleep. When Yassiguindja awoke she would have hers to tend. One lives for oneself only, not for others. At least, so he had been taught.

This done, he went out.

He soon came back. He never wore anything but his loin-cloth, whether it were the dry or wet season. And the cold nipped him.

The fog was thick. So thick that he had not been able to guess the position of the huts where lived his eight other wives, with the children they had borne him.

Brr ! crouching, shivering, with red eyes and arms crossed, his teeth chattered.

The good heat of the fire soon thawed his frozen limbs. His hands stretched over the flames, he began to hum the tune of a well-known song. He invented words to it as he hummed. There was frequent mention of white men and women.

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The wind pushes fog across from the horizon where the sun rises to the horizon where it sets. A fog which cloaks the heights of the *kagas*, as yet but dimly revealed. And in these mists all the birds sing, from parakeets to the iridescent blackbirds, from wagtails to soldier-birds and toucans.

Turtle-doves skim the ground in their flight, hens scuttle away with their heads beneath their wings as soon as, through the dissolving mist, the low circling of carrion crows becomes visible.

A light breeze rises, falls, returns. Amongst the trees there is the shiver of myriad damp leaves. The branches of the *varas* rub together. And the bamboos sigh with the swaying of their long flexible stalks.

A final breath of wind blows away the last traces of fog, and the sun breaks through, cleansed, intact, clear-defined.

Before that widening rent through which the red sun appears a universal lull creeps over the land to the farthest solitudes.

But, indifferent to the sun's blessing, Batouala the *mokoundji* was seated a few

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steps from his hut, before the newly lighted brazier. With a blank mind he smoked his good old pipe, his good *garabo*, slowly, solemnly.

Day had come.

CHAPTER TWO

HE smoked in short puffs, with half-closed eyes.

Now and again he expectorated, with a profound sigh.

He smoked thus for a long time.

The sun became hotter as it rose in the sky. It might indeed be welcome to him, but, accustomed as he was to its daily warmth, he heeded it little.

He smoked. . . .

Wind stirred the foliage of the cotton-trees, lifted their branches, and rustled amongst the tender green shoots.

In places the rising sap had burst through the scarred and living bark, like great tears of ruddy gold.

Creepers were inextricably woven and interwoven between the trees like bridges.

The pungent odour of hot earth, of rank grasses, of trees, the pestilential stink of mangrove swamps, and the aroma of wild mint were carried on the wind.

Lost in this rich vegetation, birds uttered

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their cries, whilst the croak of carrion vultures was faintly audible as they hovered, dark specks, in the azure sky.

Behind the *Pombo* or behind the *Bamba*, some one was singing: “*Ehé . . . yaba . . . ho !*”

That meant work was going on over there, somewhere, song provides the necessary rhythm for effort.

This monotonous song disturbed the surrounding silence. When it ceased one could only hear brushwood crackling in the heat of the sun, one was only aware of those many small sounds of which silence is composed.

Then the song began again, more faintly, over there. . . .

Yassiguindja had prepared the usual cassava. At the same time, but in different pots, she had stewed sweet potatoes and wild purslane.

When her lord deigned to eat, she took up the pipe he had abandoned.

In her turn she smoked, watching absent-mindedly a stew of caterpillars.

Her eight companions, leaning against their respective huts, were performing their toilet.

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There was no affectation about this. Man and woman are made for one another. Since they cannot ignore the points on which they differ, why worry? Bodily shame is useless. Modesty is one of those hypocrisies imported by white men. One only conceals an injury or a shortcoming. Amongst men and women only those dissemble their good points who know them to be laughable, or unworthy.

Batouala passed on from cassava to caterpillars, and from caterpillars to sweet potatoes.

Every two or three mouthfuls he took a couple of gulps of *kéné*, beer made of fermented millet seed.

When satisfied, he signed to Yassiguindja that he wished to smoke again. And once more, for a long time, a very long time, he threw short puffs from his *garabo*, followed by deep sighs.

At last, pleased with having started the day so well, he examined the digits of his right foot.

He was looking for *chigres*.

Truly, the poor old nigger must look for his *chigres*. If not, these creatures were

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capable of laying him as many if not more eggs than there are women in a populous village.

With a white man it is different. If one of them attacks his skin, he is so soft he notices it at once, and does not recover composure until his "boy" has managed to extract it.

But why harp on this? It is well known that white men are not as tough as niggers!

Here is one example in a thousand. Under pretext of paying tax they oblige every man capable of his functions to hawk about the most enormous burdens.

The expeditions last three, four, five days. They care little what may be the weight of these *sandoukous*. Whether it rains, or the sun scorches, it is not they who suffer. Even if we are overwhelmed by inclemencies, they are under shelter! So, you see? . . .

Oh, white men, white men!

They curse at mosquitoes. The buzzing of flies irritates them. They are afraid of scorpions, and of those black venomous *prakongos* which live in old thatching or amongst the stones of ruined buildings.

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They are nervous of mason-flies. They are anxious about everything. Should any man worthy the name worry about what lives and moves around him? Oh, white men, white men!

Their feet? They are an infection. Why box them up like that in black, yellow, or white skins?

And would it were only their feet that stank, but alas, their whole body exudes a corpse-like odour.

At a pinch, one can allow of feet being sewn up in bits of leather!

But to protect one's eyes with bits of white, yellow, blue, or black glass! But to cover up one's head with little baskets, N'gakoura, that beats everything!

He shrugged his shoulders in a sudden fit of contempt, and spat expressively.

Yes, white men, their cunning, their knowledge on all subjects, it is that which makes them frightening. Some of them brought over from France machines which, turning a piece of wood, talked like real white men, without one's knowing how or why.

Others—yes, he had seen it—others swallowed knives.

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It was no good arguing about it ! All over the country, and even farther, was not the terrible *Moro-Kamba* famed, the sword-eating commander who had pacified the *Bandas* ?

Then there were others who, just sitting in their chairs, could see the most distant places by means of bits of glass set in tubes—they could witness scenes far removed.

Stunning, eh !

And that *doctorro*—the name white men give their professional sorcerers—that doctorro who could make you pass blue water—yes, *blue* !—if he wished so.

But this was not the worst.

Some days ago, when the new commander arrived, had he not seen him draw the skin off his hand ? Sure, it was not skin like ordinary skins ; but still, it was a skin.

And he had skinned himself without pain ! If it had hurt him he would have cried out. As he did not cry out, it had not hurt.

And it had been proved that some of them enjoyed the privilege of removing their teeth, or of taking out one of their

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eyes, and laying it there, on the table, before every one.

Ouhm ! such things as that, no nigger sorcerers could ever achieve them. And little by little his contempt gave way before a fearful admiration. . . .

The sun had reached its zenith.

As usual, blackbirds published the event. The cry of cicadas was not yet fretting the open country. Everything seemed buried in a deep sleep. Except for the three great gusts of wind which always rise at this time of day, there was no gentle breeze to undulate giant grasses with a continuous caress. The leaves of the cotton-trees moved no more than that smoke in the distance.

Then the cicadas began.

This is the moment which negroes select for work.

Batouala went off towards an elevation overlooking the surrounding plains. He had there three *linghas* of different heights.

He approached these wooden pipes with hollowed cores, picked up two mallets from the ground, and, in the still air, he sounded two blows on the largest pipe—slowly, sonorously.

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A great silence followed. He broke the silence with two more sharp knocks. After this there was a shower of *tam-tams* sharper and sharper, faster and faster, more and more urgent, then slower and deeper, drawn out on the very smallest pipe into a sudden decrescendo, emphasized by one final summoning note.

And lo, over there, and over there, and farther than that, farther still, everywhere, to left, to right, behind, in front, rolled a similar sound. The same *tam-tams* rumbled, persisted, answered. Some were faint, hesitant, muffled, uncertain. Others were clear, rebounding from echo to echo, from *kaga* to *kaga*. The invisible had sprung into life.

"You have called us," said these sounds, "you have called us. . . . We have heard. . . . We are listening. . . . What do you want? Speak."

Twice the distance repeated the same troubled or distinct notes.

When the last of these had died on the horizon, Batouala answered.

At first they were words without strength. They seemed to tell of daily monotony and

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torpor, of a loneliness which nothing can sadden or cheer, of resignation before destiny.

The mallets were running alternately on one or other of the three *linghas*. They gave birth to a melopœia, overwhelming like a tornado, before the *donvorro* begins to blow.

The song expanded. After a sudden interval, its volume increased. It rose ever higher and higher.

Batouala was streaming with perspiration. He was happy. Almost dancing.

He was calling them all, his men, their women, their children, their friends, the friends of their friends, the chiefs whose blood he had drunk, and who had drunk his blood. He wanted them all to come there in nine days, to assist at the big *yangba* which he was going to give, for the occasion of the *ga'nza*.

The measure of the sounds, which had been built up for seasons and seasons, promised wonders. There would be feasting, drinking, palavers, rejoicing. In fact, there would be *yangba*. Not one *yangba* only, but all *yangbas*. Not only the elephant

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dance, the dance of javelins, the dance of warriors, but moreover, but also, but especially, the dance of love, that the *sabangas* dance so well.

There would be feasting and *yangba*, *yangba* and drinking. Ah, cassava, sweet potatoes, gourds, yams, ndalos, maize ! Ah, beer of millet seed ! *Vékés*, pimento and honey, fish and crocodile's eggs ! There would be all these things to eat, and more, much more ! All that to drink, and much more ! There would be drinking and eating to the sound of *olifants* and *balafons*. Every one must come ! Yes, yes, yes ! it was the feast of the *ganzas*. Only once in twelve moons is circumcision performed, and excision. Every one must come ! There would be laughter, *yabao* !

The echoes brimmed over with the joy of this message, and prolonged its jokes and its laughter.

When they were silent, there was a heavy pause, which did not last long. For all around, far, very far away, as at his first call, the conversation began again on invisible *tam-tams*. And in spite of the remoteness of these sonorous instruments,

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at the close of each phrase could be distinguished the same eager note.

"We have heard you. . . . We have heard. . . . We have understood. . . . You are the greatest of the *m'bis*, Batouala. . . . You are the greatest of the *mokoundjis*. . . . We will come. . . . We will certainly come . . . and our friends will be there. . . . We will rejoice. . . . *Bombance!* . . . We will sing. . . . We will drink, like sponges, like white men. . . . You can count on us. . . . Ouorro . . . Ohourro . . . Kanga . . . Yabingui . . . Délépon . . . Tongoumali . . . Yabada . . . All the *m'bis* and all the *n'gapous* will be there. . . . We will come, we will come."

When these last replies had faded in the distance, Batouala went down to the junction of the *Bamba* and the *Pombo*, to examine the eel-pots he had set there the day before.

He took with him two spears, a bow, a wallet and a kid's skin.

Wherever one goes, however short a distance, the wallet must not be forgotten. So many things can be hidden in it!

He put in two leaves of *bimbi*, a quiver

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full of barbed arrows, and several *manioc* (tapioca) cakes.

That was all he needed. He could now face the worst dangers. He had his spears, bow and arrows. He had cakes to stave off hunger. By means of the *bimbi* leaves he could add to his meal, for if he put them into an eel-pot they would stupefy any surrounding fish.

He went off.

As he walked, he scrutinized the ground. It was one of the countless habits derived from his ancestors. The older he grew, the more he realized its excellence.

White men do not seem to understand how useful it is to look where you step. Stones wound them—they slip on mud. A little observation would prevent falls and wounds, or minimize them. It does not mean any time lost. And since, in the long run, experience teaches us that time has no value, only the wisdom gained by experience matters.

Batouala had just disappeared when Bissibingui arrived.

He was a strapping young man, vigorous and handsome. There was always a meal

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for him at Batouala's and a *bogbo* to sleep on, for Batouala honoured him with a special friendship.

But the great *mokoundji* was not the only one who felt affection for him. Though he was unaware of it, eight of his nine wives had already given Bissibingui proof of the ardour of their feelings.

And as to Yassiguindja, she was already less docile to the commands of the lord who had bought her than to those of Bissibingui. She was only awaiting a favourable occasion to show the latter her desire for him.

A woman must never refuse a man's desire. And vice versa. Instinct alone is law. There is no great harm in deceiving your man, or rather, in not belonging to him alone.

If amends for use of his goods are made to the original owner in the form of hens, kids, or clothing, it should be reparation enough. All should be well.

Unfortunately this would not be so in Batouala's case. Jealous, vindictive, violent, it was certain that in spite of prevailing custom, he would not hesitate to suppress

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those who trespassed on his property. He had bought at a high price, and he alone wished to sow the seed. Yassiguindja, Batouala's favourite, knew this well. She wished to make quite sure of yielding only when there was no risk of discovery.

For the last two or three moons Bissibingui's visits had been more rare. He had reached his sixteenth season of rains. That is the age when men worthy the name spend their whole time running after women, like a panther after an antelope.

Bissibingui had developed quickly, had grown in body and muscle. It was *yassis* who ran after him, not he after them. They honoured his manhood, his vigour. He had caused the separation of several couples, followed by interminable palavers. So much so that the Commander, pestered with complaints, had threatened to imprison him.

This increased his reputation.

His arrival at Batouala's was greeted with welcoming cries. He was asked the names of the women he had known since his last visit. If it was true he had been after so and so . . . and a thousand intimate questions about some one else.

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He smiled without answering these jokes, took up Batouala's pipe and a stuffing of *n'gao* tobacco leaves, on which he placed a hot ember.

Then he stretched out on a mat. With closed eyes he smoked in short puffs. . . .

"You must beware of women," Yassiguindja was saying. "One day you will come back to us enriched with *kassiri*."

The eight other women laughed :

"Eh! . . . eh! . . . éhé! . . . ééé! . . . *Yabao!* . . . that Yassiguindja, ééé!" They smacked their thighs.

"But *kassiri* is a mere nothing," she continued, "beware of catching something worse, my friend. *Iche!* You will fall into small pieces, very small pieces. First of all you will get covered in scabs, spotted like a leopard. Later you will lose your teeth, your hair, your fingers. Remember Yakenlépen who died three, four, five moons ago."

They laughed all the more.

They were still laughing when Batouala returned.

The joke was explained to him.

He joined in the general hilarity. There

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was great mirth. They held their sides, they bounced up and down with amusement, they shed tears.

“Ehé! . . . ééé! . . . éhé! . . . O Batouala! . . . N’gakoura!”

The sun was sinking.

The cooing of *golokotos* died down little by little, and the piping of wagtails, and the plaintive cries of carrion vultures.

Faint mists veiled the summits of the *kagas*. The sun sank. Hens, kids and ducks returned to shelter.

Mottled clouds stretch across the sky. The sun has almost vanished, so red, it is like the bloom of a great trumpet flower. It extends long rays. At last it sinks into the crocodile jaws of the abyss.

Long rays are still thrown up into space. They fade in gradual tints, growing increasingly transparent, losing themselves in the immensity of sky, shading off into nothingness. That indefinable silence which has watched the agony and death of the sun reigns over all things.

With a poignant sadness stars brighten in the colourless air. The hot earth steams. Damp scents of night waft abroad. Dew

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falls. The paths are slippery. The air is heavy with a faint aroma of wild mint, and buzzes with the sound of many insects.

Somewhere there is the noise of pounding tapioca, meal, or maize, and the sound of *tam-tams*.

Fires light up all around. Their smoke locates the huts. The various frogs pipe, bellow, or croak according to their kind. Djouma, the little russet dog, barks persistently.

What means this indefinable stupor and anguish?

Ipen, the white moon, appears—slowly gliding through the clouds, like a boat which brushes the river weeds in its passage.

She is already six nights old. . . .

CHAPTER THREE

THREE days before the feast of the *ga'uzas* there was a terrible tornado which brought to a climax a season of disastrous rains.

It was preceded by no warning signs. The day had dawned over Grimari just like any other day: grey at first, then bright and warm.

The dense foliage was swayed by a gentle wind, neither cold nor hot. Under shelter of the leaves *golokotos* were cooing, as were also *bokoudoubas* and *lihoulas*, who differ from *golokotos*, the former in size, the latter by their green plumage.

Above millet fields, above trees, above *kagas*, circled an ever gathering number of carrion vultures. . . . Now and again, with a sudden swoop, one of them would fall on an invisible prey. Then would soar away upward on great wings. . . .

It was neither cool nor oppressive. . . .

The monkey tribe was disporting itself along the *Bamba* and the *Pombo*. In one

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place capered *tagouas*, who utter plaintive cries like a child's. In another grimaced *n'gouhilees* with black and white spotted coats.

They scattered in terror before a flight of bees who were in hot pursuit of the honey-eater (a bird).

For a time only the buzzing of bees could be heard. Leaves rustling in the wind gave the impression they were still there when they had already flown far away.

It was neither cool nor oppressive. . . .

There was a persistent cooing of *bokou-doubas* and *golokotos*. The sound of monotonous songs and of the pounding of dry millet-seed floated down from villages lost in the hills and up from valleys where nestled other villages. In the sky circled an ever increasing number of carrion vultures.

Late in the morning Macoudé, the fisherman, paid a surprise visit to Batouala, his brother, whom he saw but seldom.

He had found two big fish in his eel-pots, and decided to invite his brother to join the feast. As Bissibingui was there he was also invited.

Macoudé and Batouala were brothers by

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the same father and mother, and not merely related by the usual tie, when a man who can afford it buys several women and has children by all of them.

The three went off in procession, like ducks. Men should not walk abreast. This is forbidden by custom, as ancient as the negro race itself.

Djouma followed, his ears flattened to his head. . . .

"Some people act very proud," said Indouvoura, one of Batouala's wives.

A jealous and sensual woman, she could not get over seeing Bissibingui abandoning her for Yassiguindja.

"Yes, some people play the proud."

"Of course, one is not obliged to notice it. But still, it makes it all the easier to impose on people who lack pride. Eh, Yassiguindja?"

There were giggles. Yassiguindja was not liked.

Y.—"Indouvoura, I think you are right," she answered. "All the same, I don't know who you are referring to. I expect you mean that *n'gapon* married to a powerful chief?"

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I.—"Well, she has no right to be proud, seeing what bestialities she stoops to."

Y.—"She has an excuse. She has married a white man. It is responsible for everything."

I.—"Now you are insulting me, you old hag, you are insulting me. The womb that bore you was rotten. You are dirt. Be quiet. Shut your mouth, or I will strangle you. . . ."

Y.—"Don't shout, old friend, I am not deaf."

I.—"I haven't told on you, have I? Ah, yes, yes. . . . I will break this mortar on your ugly face. I will tell Batouala that you are unfaithful with Bissibingui. I will tell him. . . ."

Y.—"Well, well, well! I am sorry, Indouvoura. I have known you for so many seasons of rain that I had forgotten your *n'gapou* origin, and that you had served as wife to a white man!"

I.—"Yes, and you know I was not referring to you. Everybody knows your virtue. And Bissibingui, of whom we have just spoken, knows how you hold off the men. . . ."

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Indouvoura rushed at Yassiguindja. She would have beaten, bitten, scratched her. While her companions held her back, she hurled menaces. She would complain to the Commander. She would tell every one that Yassiguindja had absorbed a *yorro* to prevent children. She would ask the ancients to condemn her to take the poison trial. And after all, why boil with anger? What was Bissibingui? *She* did not care a straw for him. One does not have dealings with a man infected by *kassiri*!

I.—“If one cannot eat all one covets, she says she is no longer hungry.”

Y.—“As to that cub Bissibingui, if he has what you say, I pity you, my poor Indouvoura!”

These last words turned the laugh against Indouvoura :

I.—“You have cut off your own nose. . . .”

Y.—“That is what comes of jealousy, Indouvoura. When you took Bissibingui from me, was I jealous?”

I.—“Do you think he is *your* property? What greed!”

—“Ah, Yassiguindja, she is priceless!”

—“Yes, and she can get her own back!”

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“Come,” said Yassiguindja, “enough joking for one day. Come and have some *manioc*. What I like is a *baba*. Bed, victuals, *manioc* cakes, men, dances and tobacco—those are the only things worth having.”

This witticism was received with general amusement.

Bit by bit the sky had grown ashen grey, and then slate-coloured.

The wind sank. It became suddenly very oppressive. Flies, flies, endless flies began to buzz everywhere.

One by one the birds became quiet. The carrion vultures disappeared one by one.

Great white clouds surged up from behind the *kagas*. They heaped up and thickened. They were blown in all directions by contesting winds.

Soon an occult force pushed them towards the *Bamba*.

They were blacker than coal, tangled together in masses, ousting each other, outracing one another. They behaved like wild bulls escaping from a bush-fire.

Streaks of lightning divided them. Rumours of thunder were borne on the echoes.

Pots and mats were carried indoors.

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Blue smoke curled through the roofs and hung lifeless around the huts.

All is quiet. Over there the sky is blocked with clouds. They are standing still now, overhanging the *Bamba*, the *Dela*, the *Deka*; overhanging the villages of *Yakidji* and *Soumana*, the villages of *Yabingui* and *Batouala*; overhanging the villages of *Bandapou*, *Tamandé*, *Yabada*, *Gratagba*, *Oualade*, *Poumayassi* and *Pangkoura*. The clouds darkened all that greenness, they cut short the daily life, and they waited there, full of menace, for a signal which hung fire.

Over there, over there, between *Soumana* and *Yakidji*, the clouds hang in a sombre curtain between heaven and earth. It is rain. Impelled by the same force which directed the clouds, it streams down on *Bamba* and on *Grimari*.

As it advances, it overwhelms the conquered land with a heavy fog.

Ouhououou ! . . . a strong hot wind has risen at last, coming from nowhere.

The banana leaves rub together. There is a muddled chorus of croaking. *Koungbas* and *létteureus* are calling the rain.

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The wind wails and puffs. It tears at grasses and branches, bullies lime trees, destroys foliage and sweeps the ground, raising a great cloud of red dust. It has flown past. It is weaker.

Its dying moan fades gradually into nothing. Silence reigns once more, a tense silence following on this clamour and this rumble.

Now it is coming again. Here is the rain ! here it is ! A good scent of wet earth is carried on the wind. The thunder breaks nearer. Rain falls, splashing in long thin lines on the dry brushwood and the rocks. It grows cooler. The wind increases. This is the *donvorro*.

It gains every moment in fury. Rain falls. A warm, flooding torrent, heavy, solid, interminable, overpowering. It streams over the *Dela* and the *Deka*, over the *kagas* which are yet visible and over the horizons which have long been hidden. The bush is overcome by this united fury of rain and *donvorro*. The trees are stripped of leaves, their branches are broken. Roofs are torn off and carried away.

A dense mist rises from the rivers, which

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had been overheated until now. Water, meeting water, rushes down the roads in cascades or in streams, and rushes down the hills towards the rivers.

The *donvorro* urges them onward. Rain, growing heavier and heavier, rips open and beats down hut roofs, splashes inside and puts out fires, and demolishes walls. Meantime heaven and earth are astounded by the dazzling glare of forked lightning, the intermittent crackles of electricity, the crash of falling trees dragging others with them, and the all-pervading roll of thunder.

The hurricane lasted all day, all night, and all the next morning until after midday.

The wind gradually died down and only the rain continued to fall, but lightly now, in a thin, fine drizzle. . . .

Koungbas and *létteureus*, rejoicing in the downpour, croak in the bush, which is partly flooded.

When the grass has become drenched, when all the irregularities in the ground have turned into so many lakes, frogs begin to sing.

You must lead the music, bull-frogs! Your tones are strong, deep, measured: toads can join in the chorus.

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Létteureus and *koungbas* sing. The surrounding humidity makes them happy. When the world is like this, they are her masters.

They sing.

“Ka-ak . . . ka-ak . . . ti-tilu . . . titi-lu . . . kéé-ex . . . kéé-ex . . . kidi-kidi . . . ki-kidi . . . dja-ah . . . dja-ah !” They are like tinkling bells, grinding pestles, clashing spears, a most unearthly din. The croaking of all kinds of frogs and toads is making *yangba*. Bull-frogs, cymbal-toads, bull-toads and hammer-frogs hammer out their noise, mingling their strident and bellowing voices. “Ti-tilu . . . ti-tilu . . . kéé-ex . . . kéé-ex . . . ka-ak . . . ka-ak . . . ki-kidi . . . kidi-kidi !”

At dusk it becomes a deafening *tam-tam*. Then suddenly it stops. But, as suddenly, it begins again. . . .

The rain has stopped. The roads are slippery. Across them stream long lines of corpse-ants, abandoning their flooded nests. A putrid smell of rot hangs on their traces.

Night falls, almost without twilight.

The moon glides leisurely out of her hut of clouds to survey her plantation of stars.

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She pursues her way, a yellow, shining, almost circular disc. She has no halo. The stars glimmer. In the sky there are only stars, millions of stars, and the moon.

A night bird hoots : " Oubou-hou, Oubou-hou ! " Frogs are still croaking. There is a chorus of grasshoppers and crickets. Here and there a few glow-worms show their intermittent green fire. But for these, everything sleeps. It is night. There is a gentle wind. It is cold.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE full moon follows her track through the stars. The feast of the *ga'nzas* is beginning.

As good luck would have it the Commander left *Grimari* a week ago. The excellent idea of inspecting *Bamayassi* had occurred to him. When the cat is away the mice play. The station is invaded. A dense crowd swarms there. It was the only clearing which allowed sufficient space for the necessary figures in the warriors' dance.

A wide open clearing extended from the Commander's hut to the *Bamba*, and only the soldier Boula had been left to guard this spot, including the administrative residence and its outbuildings, the military camp and the prison. Nobody minded Boula.

Who would care a fig for a *kouloungoulou*? He was nicknamed *Kouloungoulou* because he dragged his feet.

The *yangba* was not in full swing yet

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because the *ga'nzas* had not arrived. But there was every sign that it would be a remarkable feast.

A dozen *linghas* set up at intervals looked promising. They were not ugly little *tam-tams*, worn by use and weather-beaten, or eaten down by white ants. On the contrary, each one seemed to dilate proudly the swelling of its double pipe, made of an immense tree-trunk, carefully hollowed out.

They had been painted with a mixture of white earth and *manioc* flour, and on this white ground a broad red stripe had been painted from top to bottom, and from side to side.

On the ground stood baskets heaped with millet-seed, *manioc* cakes, bunches of bananas, dishes of caterpillars, eggs, fish, wild tomatoes and bush-asparagus. Masses of antelope and elephant flesh had been dried in the sun or grilled before the fire ; also quarters of *phacoceæ* and wild bull. There were roots, despised by white men—*dazos*, for example, which are just as good as their potatoes, *bangaos*, or sweet potatoes, with red or yellow skin. There were

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babasos, called *yams* (*babaso-yam*) by the whites. And there were huge jars full of the drink compounded out of meal and fermented maize. To crown all, there were a few bottles of *pernod*.

These latter, purchased from the *Boundjoudoulis*, were kept reserved for the chiefs, heads and ancients.

Thick black smoke rose from the multitude of fires, where damp wood was burning.

Along all the roads from *Kama*, from *Pangakoura*, *Pouyamba* and *Yakidji* streamed men, women, children, boys, girls, slaves, dogs—a swarm of late-comers making their way towards the smoke which could be seen from afar.

They have left their *kagas*, their stretch of bush, their mud-swamped *patas-patas*, and they are coming, they have come . . . armed with spears and arrows, and carrying bits of burning wood to light their way through the forest glade.

As soon as they arrived the women started grinding into powder meal or *manioc* with their *koufrou*. They thudded their pestles in the wooden mortars to the rhythm of a *kouloungoulou* song.

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“ The kouloungoulou, it is known, only
lives in cow-stalls.

It is even said he only eats cow-dung.

The kouloungoulou, the kouloungoulou,
Ia-hé, the kouloungoulou, ho !

His only wealth is a most admirable malady,
And, like a good husband, he has given it to
his wife.

And his wife, she has given it to their
worthy daughter.

Ia-é ! Ia !

The kouloungoulou ! the kouloungoulou !

Ia-é ! the kouloungoulou, ho ! ”

There were bursts of laughter, and the
amusement became general. They laughed
for the sake of laughing. They talked for
the sake of talking without being sure what
they were going to say. The influence of
kéné was already showing itself, for maize
and meal-beer was ceaselessly absorbed.

“ How comes it that, crowned by a chéchia
tourougou,

We spy, passing through our beautiful
plantations

A kouloungoulou, a kouloungoulou !

Ia-hé, a kouloungoulou, ho !

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Whatever happens, know, O yassis, my
friends,

You must always refuse to share his mat.
Not on a yassi, but on something else,
Ia-hé, Ia !

Does he lie, the vile kouloungoulou,
Ia-hé, a kouloungoulou, ho ! ”

What a wonderful gathering ! All the
m'bis are there, and the *n'gapous*, with their
ancients.

Batouala kept near his aged parents, in
the centre of the group formed by the
chieftains.

He was haranguing them.

It was said several white men had been
killed at *Bangui* . . . that soon, the
Governor would be going to *Bandorro* . . .
that at *M'Poutou*, over there in France, the
French were fighting the Germans.

While he talked, he was stuffing with
hemp or with tobacco the *garabos* that
were at hand, lighting them and then
passing them round after a few puffs,
according to custom.

“ You know, Batouala, that I am just back
from *Krébedgé*, ” said Pangakoura the *mandjia*

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chief. "One learns a lot by travelling, if it is only that white men are not very friendly amongst themselves. Here is good proof :

"I had complaints to make against a Portuguese man, and I went to the Commander, whom we have nicknamed Kotaya because of his big belly. I told him my story, cooked up a little, of course. 'Pangakoura,' he said, 'you are the most imbecile of all the imbeciles I have ever met. Why, you old idiot, don't you know that a *poutriquesse* counts for nothing ?

" 'Well, at the beginning of all things, you understand, the N'gakoura of the white men took all the best materials available and fashioned us out of them. Then he used what was left to make dirty niggers, like you.

" 'Very much later, he wanted to make Portuguese men, and he hunted about, and there was nothing left but niggers' excrements ; and so out of these he formed the first Portuguese men.' "

Every one laughed.

"Don't you think the slump in rubber is an unexpectedly hopeful thing for us ? " asked Batouala.

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"Except for that, we should not have been able to gather at the station for our religious celebration, even if the Commander had been away.

"There would always have been one of those *boundjoudoulis* who make us pay a *pata*, yes, five francs, when white men are only charged a *méya*, ten sous."

"Your speech is clear water," said Yakidji. "We must thank you, Batouala, for this fortunate crisis, owing to which all the traders have been obliged to go to *Krébedgé*, or *Bangui*."

"May they perish with open muzzles and their feet sticking in dung."

"But that is not all, not all by any means, Batouala. The *yogorogombés* are being embarked because of all the big palaver between the German whites and the French whites."

"Yes, all the long shots, all that rabble of snipers is going to fight at *M'Poutou*."

"Our present masters may join them. I, Yabada, believe it is possible."

"*Yabao*," mumbled Batouala's old father, "and what I believe is that you call *kagas* rivers, and your wishes actualities."

"Well, it will soon be three seasons of

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rain that the French and Germans are palavering."

"Do the French people here look as if they wanted to go? Not they. There is danger out there. Why should they go and get killed? Every one tries to save his skin, Yabada."

There was more laughter.

"You are always right, O ancient, I own it. But you will allow me to hope that these Frenchmen are beaten by the German men."

"Ah, *boundona* Yabada: German or French, they are all white. Why change? We are under the yoke of the French. We know their good points and their bad. They play with us like a *niaou* with a mouse."

"The *niaou* always ends by eating the mouse it plays with. Since we must be killed and eaten sooner or later, what is the point of having different *niaous* to the present ones?"

"It is only running away from a wild bull into the jaws of a panther."

The discussion was becoming general.

"He is right. Why change? The successors would probably prove worse."

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"They have no love for us, and we treat them as they treat us."

"We ought to massacre them."

"That is right."

"One day, some time hence, we will. . . ."

"Yes, when *banziris*, *yakohamas*, *goubous*, *sangbas*, *dacpas* . . . in fact every one who talks *Banda*, *Mandjia* or *Sango* . . . have laid down their old quarrels."

"When that happens, the *Bamba* will flow backwards."

"And Macondé will catch the moon in his eel-pots."

The laughing began again, and lasted so long that a loud distant noise was hardly audible.

"Either you are all the sons of dogs," cried Batouala, drunk with hemp wine and *kéné*, "or else already you are more drunk than I am. Are you men, yes or no? Have the *basinguers* of *Senousson* castrated you? Perhaps they have. Anyhow, I who am speaking could not possibly do otherwise than loathe white men!

"I remember the time when *m'bis* lived happily and peacefully by the river *Niubangui*, between *Bessoukémo* and *Kémo-*

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ouadda. As soon as white men appeared, most of us withdrew to the regions of *Krébedgé*, taking with us gods, pots, chickens, mats, dogs, women, kids, children and ducks.

“ I was quite a kid, then.

“ We kept up a good fight, built our huts, sowed our plantations. No good. The whites took *Krébedgé*.

“ Again we retreated. *Griko* appealed to us. We settled at *Griko*. This meant the same difficulties as when we settled before.

“ Now we thought to rest in peace. No fear ! Here they come again, and fall on *Griko*.

“ Once more, in despair, we set off.

“ *Grimari* ! we reach *Grimari* ! We choose a fine site between the *Bamba* and *Pombo*, and settle there.

“ Alas, the whites were already down on us before we had finished our building.

“ We were tired out, discouraged ; we did not want to see our tribe wiped out. We had lost so many men in capturing the land where we settled—so we stayed where we were, and determined to make the best of the whites. . . .”

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The immense, distant sound was approaching.

"But our submission did not win their good will. Not satisfied with suppressing our customs, they wish to impose their own on us: 'You must no longer play *patara* for money!' We may no longer get drunk. Our dances and songs keep them awake. They deign to allow these if we pay a *dime*. 'Pay, pay,' it is always 'pay.' Government coffers are insatiable.

"But in the long run, one would obey these miserable people if they were only more logical and consistent among themselves. But not a bit of it. Why, two moons ago, that beast Ouorro, drunk as a white man, beat his *yassi* like a dog. Talk of beating, he gave it her thoroughly enough. She was a mass of wounds and bruises. Who blames him? Is there any one of you here who has never beaten his *yassi*?

"Well, if you please, this poor fool made her complaints to the Commander.

"As it happened, he was entertaining some white travellers.

"As a rule he is an exceptionally sober man. But this particular time, he could

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hardly stand up. He ordered a *tourougou* to put our Ouorro in prison, and threw an empty bottle at his head because he was slow in carrying out the order.

"The *tourougou* collapsed with a bleeding face, grimacing in pain. And the whites split themselves with laughter as though it were a good joke.

"That is how we are treated.

"Yabada, if you want to prove it, dare to throw two francs at *patara* where the Commander will see you.

"The stocks are the very least you will get for this abominable crime. Only white men may gamble. . . ."

With bloodshot eyes, he stammered vociferously :

"White men are worthless. They have no feeling for us. They treat us as liars. Our lies don't deceive people. If now and again we exaggerate the truth, it is because the truth is not quite good enough. It is because *manioc* without salt has no flavour.

"But white men lie for no such purpose. There is a method and a purpose to their lying.

"That is why they are superior to us.

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“ They say niggers hate one another, universally. Why, my goodness ! my father, *Boundjoudoulis* ! do the snipers and the commanders agree together ? And why shouldn't we be like them ? Men are all alike, whatever colour they may be—just the same here as at *M'Poutou*. . . .”

The distant rumbling was coming nearer, like the bumble of a myriad blue and green *voumas* round a carrion hawk.

Batouala had got up, shouting and gesticulating.

“ I shall never tire of cursing the wickedness of white men. Especially their duplicity. What did they not promise us ? ‘ Later,’ they say, ‘ you will recognize that we make you work for your own happiness. We only take a small portion of the money we force you to earn. We will use it to build you villages, roads, bridges, and machines driven by fire, which run on rails.’

“ Where are these roads, these bridges, these extraordinary machines ? *Mata ! Nini !* nothing ! nothing ! Much worse, they rob us to our last penny, instead of only exacting a moiety of our earnings.

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And don't you think our lot is lamentable? . . .

"Thirty moons ago, they were still buying our rubber at three francs a kilo.

"Without the ghost of an explanation, the same weight of *banga* falls in a day to fifteen sous—and the Governor chooses this very moment to raise our tax from five to seven and ten francs!

"But then, everybody knows that from the first day of the dry season to the last day of the wet season, our work only swells the taxes, when it does not, at the same time, line the Commander's pockets for him.

"We are taxable flesh! We are only beasts of burden! No, not even beasts! Dogs! Well, no, they feed their dogs, and they care for their horses. But we, we are less than these. We are the basest of the base. They are killing us off, by degrees."

A crowd perspiring with drink was pushing up behind the group formed by Batouala, the ancients and the chiefs.

There was a volley of oaths and imprecations. Batouala was right a thousand times over. Formerly, before the advent of the whites, men lived happily. They worked

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a little, for themselves, they eat, drank, slept. Just now and again there was a bloodthirsty scrimmage, when they tore out the livers of the slain to eat their courage and absorb it into themselves—those were the happy days, before the advent of white men.

Now they were only slaves. There was nothing to hope for from that heartless race; for *boundjous* had no heart. They abandoned the children black women bore them, and these children, knowing they had white fathers, do not deign to mingle with niggers. They lived, these *boundjouvoukous*, full of hate and envy, loathed by all, rotting with vice, lazy and wicked.

“As to white women. It is no use speaking of them even. For a long time they were thought to be wonderful creatures. They were feared and respected like fetishes.

“They had changed their opinion now! White women were as easy of access as black, and more sensual; they had vices black women did not know of . . . but what is the good of talking about it?

“And then they demanded respect!”

Batouala's father raised his hand. The

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tumult died down as though by magic ; but there was still that sound of songs and music floating on the breeze.

“ My children, all you say is true.

“ Only, you should realize there is nothing to be done. Be resigned. When a *bamara* roars, no antelope dares bell in the neighbourhood. You are no longer the strongest. Keep quiet.

“ Besides, we have not come here to curse *boundjous*. I am old. During your controversies my tongue has become loosened. Let us shout less, and drink more. *Pernod* is the only thing of any value white men have produced, after beds and long chairs.

“ I know I am short-sighted. Yet I think I saw several bottles of absinthe. Are you going to open them, Batouala ? ”

The tension was relieved. Every one roared with laughter, and Batouala hastened to satisfy the malicious old man's desires.

CHAPTER FIVE

THERE was a great hubbub. That tremendous noise in the distance was descending on *Grimari*. It had now reached the junction of the *Pouyaba* and *Pangakoura* roads. Now it was coming closer and had got to the stable where the Commander's cattle were kept. Now it had crossed the bridge over the *Bamba*, and suddenly it burst in on the station.

It was no longer a loud, distant noise. N'gakoura had transformed it into a troop of young men and girls.

They came forward dancing. They were naked, their bodies whitened with ashes and *manioc* flour. Death strikes any who do not observe this custom.

They leaped to the rhythm of an incomprehensible guttural or nasal song. They were using the sacred language, *Samali*. They moved in a kind of transport.

The assembly greeted them with a rumbling shout, which travelled far down

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the moonlit banks of the *Bamba* and *Pombo*, and was answered by the horn-bills aroused from sleep.

The crowd was swayed by a sudden strange, compelling joy. Warriors seized their spears. Dogs barked, children cried, and the women, intoxicated with *kéné* and beer, stamped their feet yelling :

“ *Ga’nza, Ga’nza ! . . . Ga’nza !* ”

There was a low rumble from the *li’nghas*.

What luminous magic ! In this blanched world only the trees stand out black, with their heavy foliage. The ground is white ; the *kagas* are white ; the roads are like white ribbons ; the *Pombo* and *Bamba* are streams of moonlit water.

The warriors grasp their spears and crouch behind their shields, waiting.

There is a roll of *tam-tams* and they leap forward towards the *Bamba*, brandishing spears, and raising shields on high. Then, making a sudden turn, they come back, with great shouts.

The *ga’nzas* dance on the same spot. There is an overwhelming flood of *tam-tams*, shouts, songs, *balafons* and *koundés*.

The festivity becomes organized. The

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leaders of games are the *mokoundjis-yangba*. See how eager they are! They are distinguishable by long birds' feathers plaited in their hair, and by bells jingling at their wrists, their knees and ankles.

Three of them performed a dance with arms and legs intertwined. The onlookers yelled with joy at their grimaces.

General excitement was spreading, and becoming frantic. The jingling bells of the *mokoundjis-yangba* could be heard more and more loudly amongst the clapping of hands and smacking of tongues. There would be dancing . . . dancing . . .

A tremor ran through the crowd, which drew back, opening out in a widening circle. Children advanced into the very centre, and danced.

They gesticulated, leaped, writhed and flung out their arms and legs, imitating the grown warriors whom they had watched dancing in front of their huts in the moonlight, when warm nights cloak the land and *koungbas* croak persistently.

Then the women advanced. They were naked, their hair wet with castor oil, their ears, nostrils and lips pierced with multi-

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coloured glass rings. Brass bracelets encircled their ankles and wrists. They moved in a line, each one holding on to the shoulders of the woman in front.

They formed in a wide circle and began to turn, like fire-flies at evening.

At a signal from the *tam-tam*, the circle opened.

The women sang and beat the cadence of *koundés*, *li'nghas* and *balafons* with their hands and feet.

It accelerated.

One of the dancers took her place in the middle of the semicircle formed by her companions. She stood with closed eyes, a warm, yielding figure—placed a little in front of them so that if she fell she could be supported either by those dancing behind her, or by those at either end of the line.

She took three steps forward—there was hand-clapping, one, two, three—she offered herself to some imaginary person. Rebuffed, she drew back—one, two, three. . . .

In the end, after repeated refusals, she let herself fall backwards, as though overcome with weakness and shame.

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Her friends caught and set her on her feet again. She despondently took her appointed place in the figure of the dance—at the left extremity of the semicircle. One of her fellows came forward from the right extremity to try her chance, where her comrade had failed.

When the men's turn came, there was a perfect delirium. Nothing but a mass of gaping, howling mouths, and faces streaming with perspiration. Nothing but a heavy trampling which shook the earth.

And what shouts, what laughter, what gestures! The quivering frenzy of desire had gathered force from the presence of so many men and women, from beer and *chanore* and movement and joy.

Ten men stood out, almost naked.

Of them all, Bissibingui was the finest, the most beautiful. His eyes were glowing like a bush-fire. His muscles were taut. He gave orders to his companions, because his lithe, well-knit body surpassed them all in build and height.

They had all stained their bodies with red wood and oiled them. They wore bells everywhere, even in their feather headgear,

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even on the cords which fastened their loin-cloths.

They gave out a strong odour. Perspiration from their exertions streamed over their tattoo marks. But they felt no exhaustion. Body and soul, they were absorbed in the *yangba*.

Life is so short. The day soon comes when one is unclean. Every sun brings death nearer, does it not ? There is nothing like enjoying one's manhood while it is still possible.

They danced.

Bending towards the earth they rested their hands on it to execute two or three antics. Still bending down, they stamped to right, to left, to right again, and then, throwing their arms quickly upward they beat the air, and swung them up and down, up and down, like the wings of a great carrion hawk which takes a short quick spring and then soars indolently in the quiet air.

Then they turned cart-wheels across the clearing, timing their movements to the *tam-tam* of the *li'nghas*.

Ga'nza . . . ga'nza . . . ga'nza ! . . .

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Ga'nza will be performed, ga'nza will be
performed,
Ga'nza . . . ga'nza . . . ga'nza . . . ga'nza !

Knife in hand, two old men covered with
amulets stood before a group of young men.
An old woman stood waiting, too, by the
girls. And the ancients, standing by the
old men, grinned while they watched the
young people dance, these young people
who would soon have to suffer.

Ga'nza . . . ga'nza . . . ga'nza . . . ga'nza !
To-night you will be women,
To-night you will be real men,
After having borne the ga'nza,
Ga'nza, ga'nza, ga'nza, ga'nza !

The two old men were talking :

“ For the space of one moon, two moons,
hidden in the depths of the woods, you have
prepared yourselves and fasted.

“ For the space of a moon and a moon
you have hidden yourselves from profane
glances, whitening your bodies that death
might not seize them.

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"You have only spoken the sacred language. You have lived on herbs and roots, hidden from profane glances.

"For the space of one moon and one moon you have slept anywhere—anywhere and anyhow. You have refrained from games and laughter.

"N'gakoura is pleased with you. You have withstood the ordeals. You may play, laugh, dance, move out in the open, and sleep on your own *bogbos*.

"Soon you will be men. Soon you will be women. Soon *ga'nza* will be performed.

"Your ordeals are over. You can dance, play and laugh."

Ga'nza . . . ga'nza . . . ga'nza . . . ga'nza !

Balafons, li'nghas and *koundés* were thundering. They were to drown any cries which might be uttered.

The ceremony began.

The old men sharpened their knives carefully on a flat stone, on which they had spat as a preliminary. . . .

With raised sticks, assistants were already

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hammering blows on the patient, who reeled. If a mere nothing in the way of pain knocked him down, then he was unworthy to become a man. He must be beaten to death. Custom wills it so.

But the new *ga'nza* cheated their lust for murder, and proved himself worthy of incorporation.

With every leap he made, his neighbours were splashed with blood streaming from the wounds on his legs. He must pretend to ignore pain, he must sing and dance :

Ga'nza . . . ga'nza . . . ga'nza . . . ga'nza !
Only once in one's life . . .

The two old men pursued their task, indifferent to noise. They worked mechanically, hearing, seeing nothing. They were like harvesters, working their way with *n'gapous* through the plantations at harvest time.

Some of the girls, very pale, danced dizzily. In spite of everything fear shook their limbs with an uncontrollable ague.

The old woman came up, summoned the first of the girl dancers, seized her roughly

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and deftly performed her duty. Impersonally she passed on to the next dancer and proceeded swiftly with her work.

Ga'nza . . . ga'nza . . . ga'nza . . . ga'nza !
Only once in their lives do women suffer
Ga'nza ! . . . Come to us, men !
You too, now, are ga'nza's !

Then the tumult reached its zenith.

All the preceding tumult was a mere nothing. The clamour, the confusion of dancing had merely been the preamble to the one great event : the dance of love. It is allowed only on this one night, when debauchery and crime may be indulged.

Li'nghas, *balafons* and *koundés* sound in frantic rivalry. There was a sinister screeching of horn-bills. Startled birds of prey wheel above the *yangba*.

But their cries are drowned in the mad frenzy. Two women have stepped forward. One is Yassiguindja, Batouala the *moko-undji's* wife ; the other as yet knows nothing of men.

They are both naked, depilated, with

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long glass necklaces round their throats and rings in their noses and ears. Bracelets tinkle on their wrists and ankles. Their bodies are stained a dull red.

Besides these festive decorations Yassiguindja bore a huge emblem in painted wood.

It hung low on the belt fastened round her waist, significant of her rôle in the dance.

At first she only swayed on hips and thighs. Her feet were stationary. The wooden emblem swung at each movement.

Then she glided rather than walked towards her partner, who drew back. She did not want, this woman, to yield to man's desire. Her leaps and mimicry expressed fear.

The mock man, repulsed, retreated beating the ground violently with his feet. But the young woman now had recovered from her unreasoning fear, and offered herself, from a distance. . . . She offered herself again.

Again the mock man approached her, to embrace her. She only made a faint

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show of resistance, then yielded herself, melting before his ardour like mist before the rising sun.

With her hands she covered her eyes. She had become a mere chased animal, which gives in suddenly; but first she fanned her pursuer's ardour another moment by a show of delay.

But when taking her brutally in his arms he showed the urgency of his desire, she resisted no more.

The accelerating rhythm of the dance had at last reached a significantly breathless convulsion—they stood quivering, motionless, happy. . . .

The creatures crowded round the dancers became intoxicated by a strange madness. The men flung off their loin-cloths, and the women their striped cottons.

There was a heavy odour of sweat and alcohol, acrid and penetrating as smoke.

Couples paired off, dancing as Yassiguindja had danced with her friend. There were struggles and groans.

It was the immense joy of brutes, free from all control, the drunkenness of desire, redoubled by alcohol.

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The *tam-tam*, *koundé*, and *balafon* were silent. The musicians wished to share in this revelry which they had promoted, sustained and inspired. Lost in the medley, they were dancing the dance of love, the foremost of all dances, from which all other dances are derived, though they can in no way compete with it.

They danced. The crowd exuded a hot vapour like mist rising from the ground after rain.

Two dancers fell prostrate on the earth. Suddenly Batouala flung himself on them, his fingers clenched round his knife.

He was foaming at the mouth.

He raised his hand to strike.

But quicker than frogs, Bissibingui and Yassiguindja were already out of reach.

He pursued them.

Ah, those children of dogs, they even had the impudence to caress each other before his very eyes.

He would have that bitch's skin.

As to Bissibingui, he would mutilate him. Then all the women would jeer at him.

What, Yassiguindja! Had he not paid for

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her with seven loin-cloths, a case of salt, three brass necklets, four pots, six hens, twenty kids, forty great baskets full of millet-seed, and one young female slave !

Ah, he would force her to undergo the ordeal by poison.

A terrifying and sudden stillness succeeded the indescribable uproar and scrimmage.

Then, suddenly, the silence was torn by a cry :

“ The Commander ! . . . the Commander ! . . . ”

Towards the villages there was a general *sauve-qui-peut*.

“ The Commander ! . . . the Commander ! . . . ”

The noise in all directions of that multitude in flight died down little by little.

Amongst the débris of every sort, fires, victuals and loin-cloths, there remained only one old man.

Propped against one of the *li'nghas*, he appeared to be sleeping soundly.

“ Ine . . . deille ! . . . Ine . . . deille . . . ”

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Ine . . . deille ! To the right ! Halt ! ”

There was a thud of muskets on the ground. The *tourougons* had returned.

“ Ixe ! ” ordered Sergeant Sillatigui Konaté. And then :

“ Po ! ”

The Commander arrived at a trot on his *m'barta*.

“ To the right ! . . . Line up,” ordered Sillatigui once more.

“ Sandoukou, what does this disorder mean ? ” asked the Commander, addressing the sergeant by his native name. “ And what was the shindy I heard a moment ago ? ”

“ Commander, Boula is too much of a coward, so the *m'bis* and comrades were only too glad of the chance to come to the station and get drunk. The men told me this on the road, a little time ago.”

“ Very well. All the *m'bis* chiefs must pay me a hundred francs penalty, and not later than to-day. If not, let them look out for prison, stocks, and stripes.”

“ Yes, Commander.”

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"And who is that dirty nigger, asleep there?"

"Batouala's father."

"And what is the besotted brute doing there?"

"I think he has pegged out. He has drunk a drop too much."

"Aren't those bottles of *pernod* by his side?"

"Well, it is one toad the less. Batouala must fetch away his blackguard old father as quickly as possible."

"And that pig Boula? Where is the lame calf? Oh, here he is! Good morning, *kouloungoulon*."

"Good morning, sir."

"Well, Boula, to teach you to guard the fort a little better in my absence, take fifteen days in the cells and lose a week's pay. And now, get off with you. Get out! Go! And you're lucky at that."

"Mossieu is displeased? No? otherwise, Mossieu, Boula has only to complain to the Governor. And the Governor, if he runs as fast as I chase him! . . ."

"Sillatigui! . . . Rest for every one."

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It is Sunday. Do you understand ? . . .
Dismiss ! ”

Koungbas are croaking in the thick mist
which has risen.

It is early dawn. The early dawn of a
dry season.

CHAPTER SIX

EVERY day is not a feast day. After the dry season comes the season of rain, songs of mourning after songs of joy, and after laughter, tears.

Batouala's father had departed in mid-*yangba*, through the eternal dark bush, for that village so distant that no one has ever been able to return from it.

To die drinking ! There is no finer death ! Intoxication does away with any possible regrets which the conscious mind might suffer. From sleep to death is but a step. It involves no anguish, no pain. Just a continuous gentle sliding down into the shadow. One does not reflect or resist. How delightful !

And then, nothing, nothing ! At last one enjoys rest, somewhere on the lands of N'gakouro, or else on those of Koli-kongbo.

There are no mosquitoes there, nor mists, nor cold. There is no work. No taxes to pay, nor burdens to bear. No duties

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imposed, nor payments required, *nini ! mata !* complete tranquillity, unlimited peace ! No need to perceive nor to will. Everything abounds there gratis—even women.

Since the *boundjous* had settled here, death was the only refuge for good poor niggers. The only deliverance from slavery. For them happiness could only be found over there in those distant sombre regions from which white men were formally excluded.

During eight days and eight nights of weeping and mourning, women had made lamentation around the body of Batouala's father, which was lashed to a tree.

They had covered their heads with ashes and blackened their faces as a sign of mourning. They cried and danced, and tore their breasts and limbs, wounding them.

Bystanders muttered funereal chants :

“ *Baba*, you alone are happy.
We are to be pitied,
We who mourn you.”

Ah, if there had not been traditional

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customs to enliven the weary monotony of these lives !

For after all, a dead man is not interesting ! What can one ask of him or hope of him ? Having lost all contact, he has lost all value. He is no longer a part of the community. He is as useless to the tribe as a withered leaf or a fleshless bone.

But tradition and the ancients require that dances and mournful chants should accompany the traveller who seeks down invisible paths this village of N'gakouro or Kolikongbo : so far distant that no one has ever returned therefrom.

Batouala's father was certainly quite dead. There was no doubt of it.

It was high time to bury him, after a week's exposure. Big green *voumas* were swarming over his decaying flesh.

“ *Baba*, you alone are happy.
We are to be pitied,
We who mourn you.”

Besides, hunting was claiming every one.

Just now, every night, from the horizon on all sides, thick smoke rose towards the

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sky, heralding grand days. Every evening there was the sound of *tam-tams* on the wind, and brands of burnt grass were blown about, and there was a scent of aromatic plants.

This tiresome body must be "planted" underground as soon as possible, since the proper rites had been performed, and the season for game-beating had come round.

Tradition was not so carefully observed nowadays.

Young people and, as a rule, everybody who served white men, jeered at tradition.

Of course, in their ignorance young people are very ready to jeer. They jeer at old men and their wisdom. They do not try to reason things out. Or rather, they think a shout of laughter is as good as any reasoning.

Whereas custom is founded on the experience of the ancients, and the ancients of ancients. They have put all their wisdom into it, as one heaps rubber into a basket.

Also, it was not without reason custom required that corpses should be exposed for full eight days, and even longer.

This long delay, which white men condemn,

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has first of all the advantage of allowing the entire tribe to be present at the funeral ceremony.

A *m'bres* is ceaselessly on the move, as are all niggers, for the matter of that. Here one day. Somewhere else to-morrow. And the next day, his traces have vanished.

Then, quickly, the *tam-tam* speaks. The message is received, and carried on. It jumps from valley to valley, *kaga* to *kaga*, rumbles in the undergrowth, penetrates it, and speeds from village to village, breaking to all the fatal news. And those most nearly involved, whom it seeks in particular, hasten as fast as possible to the spot.

That is one of the reasons why the dead are exposed for such a long time.

But most of all for the following reason :

The ancients of ancients have noticed that sometimes a man whom you thought dead was not dead. They had seen corpses come to life. Hence they had concluded that one can sleep like a dead man for several days, and yet be alive.

After that one cannot say it is wrong to expose dead bodies ; and for a long time, too.

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When a man has really departed to the far country, his stiffened body decomposes without delay. Though no longer speaking the language of the living, it expresses, by its very rottenness, its desire to be buried.

How can you expect the whites to be able to translate this dumb language, and admit the wisdom of the custom !

Such were the thoughts of Batouala. And he confided them in whispers to Bissibingui.

Seated side by side, they took part in the funeral obsequies.

They had been reconciled since the day after the *ga'nza*, and seemed as intimate as before, having ascribed their frenzied orgies of blood and lust to drunkenness.

But Bissibingui knew that Batouala was thinking out plans for vengeance against him. And Batouala knew that Bissibingui knew.

“ *Baba*, you alone are happy.
We are to be pitied,
We who mourn you.”

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When irritated, a white man sees red at once out there.

Bandas or *mandjias*, *sangos* or *goubons* act differently.

Vengeance is not a food which is eaten hot. It is a good thing to hide your hatred under the most warm-hearted cordiality, cordiality being the ash with which you damp the fire, in order to allow it to hatch.

Houses, plantations, goats, even money ; you put everything at the disposal of your enemy. Everything.

You try even to forestall him in his requests. His mistrust must be lulled. You should give him white or yellow goats, chickens which are yellow or white ! The colour of these *matabich* symbolizes spotless friendship, that nothing can sunder.

This game of deception can go on as long as you like. It is only a matter of knowing how to wait. Hatred is one long wait.

One fine day, when the chances seem favourable, you poison him who, for so many moons, was to you more than brother.

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Your *ouandja*. You poison him or you kill him, you will "act the panther."

Aha! aha! act the panther! Still something the whites don't know! Ché!

This was the sort of death that Batouala had specially chosen for his excellent *ouandja* Bissibingui.

Monron, the panther, is the cruel beast which roves through the bush, especially on moonless nights.

With teeth and claws, bit by bit, it rends its prey and tears it to pieces. Its whiskered muzzle smells the blood before drinking it, the blood it loves, the smoking blood. It rolls and wallows in it, gets drunk on it, and for a long time after the orgy seeks its strong scent on its licked chops.

To imitate *monron*, one dark night, masked and hidden by the bush bordering the path which he will follow, you await your victim.

Here he is! A violent leap. You bring him to the ground. You strangle him. Afterwards, using a jagged knife, or a sharp flint, or your nails, you cut the veins of his neck, like the panther does, and limb by

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limb, like the panther does, you tear him to pieces.

Batouala used to think thus. Bissibingui's reasoning was on much the same lines. Aha! What a splendid spectacle is the corpse of an old enemy!

“ *Baba*, you alone are happy.
We are to be pitied,
We who mourn you.”

A child was playing with that strange lizard, the *koliŋgo*.

Every one knew that the *koliŋgo* becomes black, green, yellow or red according to its surroundings.

But did Djouma, the little ginger dog with the very pointed ears, know that? No. He could not be expected to know it. That's why he kept barking after the *koliŋgo*; and the skinny *kosséyéndé*, who had been made mad by sleeping-sickness, imitated, like the good lunatic that he was, the chanting women, the child with the *koliŋgo*, the barking of Djouma and the wail of the mourners. . . .

Batouala made a sign and rose.

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Captives set down the thin body on one of the mats which had served it in its lifetime.

The muffled rumble of the *li'nghas* mingled with the cries of the wailing women.

“ We are going to take you at last
To your new home,
O father of Batouala.
Do not regret life.
In the Kolikongbo country
You will be happier than we.
You will drink, you will eat
Till you are no longer hungry and thirsty.
You have no further need of it.”

Having completed these last preparations, they went to the place where they were going to “ plant ” the remains of that which was a man.

It had been chosen at a short distance from the hut in which he had spent his last days.

Two circular holes, broad and deep, opposite one another, connected by a subterranean gallery.

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It is the tomb of the dead man.

He was lowered into one of these holes.

A slave had already slipped into the other.

She drew the legs of him whose spirit journeyed to the land of Kolikongbo through the subterranean passage and climbed up again, after having stretched them out on the earth.

At the present moment, Batouala's father rests, his back to the earth. Seated, he sleeps. The deepest of deep sleeps!

The second trench, that into which his legs stretch, has been filled up, first with wood, then with earth.

He has felt nothing of this strange weight, this damp and rumbling mass. He sleeps. They throw in wood on to his unfeeling head. He knows nothing of it. His eyes, once closed, do not even open.

On this dry wood a mat is spread. On the mat they heap earth. And this earth is well trampled down again and again.

Little matters to him. He sleeps. And really, when one sleeps such a sleep as this, it is in vain to put out the clothes of the sleeper on the trampled earth, and on these

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garments the pots that he used to use, his arm-chair and his weapons ; it is useless to have prepared all the necessities for living the life of the dead !

The dry wood and the mat will prevent the falling earth from disturbing his sleep. Moreover, he has in reach of his hand his usual pots and loin-cloths. Thus, supposing that he was eaten up with the desire to sally forth in the night, although dead, and wander among the villages of the living, he could, if he were hungry and thirsty, make a meal and quench his thirst ; and clothe himself if he felt cold.

But all that was unlikely. He was sleeping such a sleep.

“ You are in the Kolikongbo country,
Among the ancients of the ancients.
One day we will meet again there.”

It was finished, well finished.

They danced round the holes and destroyed the personal belongings of the dead man in a great fire which had been lit.

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“ You are in the Kolikongbo country,
Among the ancients of the ancients.
One day we will meet you there again.”

Night came. With night, cold.

They heard lord *bamara* roaring, as was his nightly custom, over there on the road from *Ponyamba*.

The glow-worms lit up the shadows with their tiny sparks of light. The gadflies, born at night, ended their flight over the braziers set to warm the slumbers of Batouala and his people. . . .

Days passed.

The roof was torn off the dead man's hut ; the wooden phallus, fixed before the dwelling of him who had been father of a family, was broken.

The head of the family was dead ; they cut off the head of the hut. A male, taken up by Kolikongbo, would beget no more : they broke that which formerly stood as a sign of his manhood.

But as for this dead man, no one gave him another thought. One was preoccupied with other and more urgent matters.

First of all, the he or she had to be dis-

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covered who had provoked the disappearance of Batouala's father by casting the evil eye.

We are born to live. If some one dies, it is because such or such a person has made up a *yorro* or pronounced incantations.

So he who cast of the spell must be found. . . .

Afterwards, ah ! afterwards . . . it was the hunting season.

Ehá ! the *bé'ngé* and his red-haired brother the *voungba*, who lives in solitude, went nosing round like hounds, with sharp questionings.

Ehá ! The maddened lowing of the kicking *gogouas*, which roll and plunge, their tails erect, blinded by the smoke and the crackling of the flames.

What was there that could not be caught in the *Banda*-groves ? Rabbits, antelopes, *cibissis* ! The blood trickles ! Muzzles and snouts are lathered with foam ! The red play of the *sagaies*, of the throwing-knives, of the arrows and of the spears grows faster and more furious ! Panting, clawing the sides of the dead animal, the dogs bark and bark ! . . .

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What death, however great, could outweigh the swift movement, the joy of action, the intoxication of slaughter, in a word everything that makes life worth living?

CHAPTER SEVEN

HAVING passed its zenith, the sun was setting towards its hut built on the borders of the invisible lands.

A nice old man, the sun, and so just ! He shines for all the living, from the greatest to the most humble. He knows neither rich nor poor, negroes nor white men.

Whatever their colour, whatever their fortune, all men are his sons. He loves them equally, smiles upon their plantations, dissolves the cold and deceptive mists to please them, re-absorbs the rain, and drives away the shadows.

Ah, the shadow ! Wherever it flees, the sun pursues it, unpitying and without mercy. He hates nothing else. His rays bring comfort to the sick. They keep for him all their warmest caresses. Light is health, light is joy ! For the sun, he is the good old boy who gives the immense and tranquil well-being of our lives.

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All that which man can neither reach nor discipline is reached and disciplined by him.

Men succeed as the waters of a river follow one another after each rainy season. They have children, who in their turn will also have children later.

The grass, which lives on earth; the animals, which live on grass; man who destroys both grass and animals—everything dies.

Where there used to be huts, smoke, and life—herds, plantations, and villages—the bush takes up its stand, the bush which will itself disappear some day. The rivers will run dry. And it is in vain that men like to believe that they will survive in their sons' sons. The oldest families will die out, like a brazier in the rain.

Meanwhile Lolo, the good old man, who fears none but Ipeu, the moon, since, when evening comes, he flees from her—old Lolo, always young, the good sun, the bright sun, as of old, so to-day, and the same to-morrow, *mokoondji*—of the gods of heaven and earth, will shine eternally on the vanished worlds. . . .

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Lying flat on his stomach on one of the highest rocks of *Kosségamba kaga*, Bissibingui was waiting.

Sometimes, just as a *kokorro*, twined round a tree-branch, opens its poison-fanged maw, as if it wished to bite or swallow the sun, he would yawn, change his position, and become motionless again.

That little, little tiny yellow patch, naked and shining over there, was the Post of the *Bamba*, it was *Grimari*.

From that tiny hut, built almost at the end of that small patch of naked yellow light, issued forth the orders which, however strange they might be, all *m'bis*, *dacpas*, *mandjas* and *langbassis* had perforce to obey.

In the dark hedge of trees, his eyes followed the wanderings of the *Bamba*, which wound, slowly widening, through the bare *kagas*.

They are marching over there. The noise they make frighten the *cibissis*, animals related both to rabbit and rat. They stumble over stones, raising dust. They march with lance on shoulder, humming tunes.

A gully. Here the *Déla* flows into the

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Bamba. It matters little. Let us get on farther.

They march and still they march : *Kosségamba* is out of sight, they have passed by the village of *Vabada*, and the heights of the *Makala kaga*.

Few earthworks, but huts everywhere. It is the land of the *langbassis* ; these are the villages of *Lissa*.

Plantations everywhere. Everywhere flat, endless plains, and after these plains the *Déka*, which rushes into the *Kandjia*. For meanwhile the *Bamba* has changed into the *Kandjia*, N'gakoura alone knows how and where !

After this came other tribes which he hardly knew. And then came the *Nionbangui*, the great river, mother of all the rivers, the *Nionbangui* on which in the time of high water the whites steer for *Mobaye* in giant canoes which go without oars, spitting through a funnel like a great fat pipe.

He had visited all these parts. All were rich in wild cattle, which were then interesting as game.

But it was better to leave the *gogonas* where they were than to have dealings, for

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their sake, with a *dacpa*, the vilest among men, and the most treacherous—except the whites. . . .

In the bush there was no sign of life. A mist of boundless sadness seemed to rise from it. The heat fell upon it, like molten lead in a blacksmith's *baparia*.

A muzzle-loader thundered from the blackest cloud of smoke, above which the vultures hovered.

For during the last two moons, from day-break to sunset, they had been burning the grass. For two moons the shadows had been lit up by the flames of the fires. And the breeze which fanned the flames carried on the echo of their dry crackling.

Bissibingui waited.

Upon the path which winds round the side of *Kosségamba* a woman appeared, clad in the fibre of the *qué'nqué* creeper.

She moved forward slowly, pipe in mouth, holding the calabash balanced on her head with her hand.

Bissibingui had already recognized her.

This woman was Yassiguindja, punctual at the rendezvous which chance had enabled him to give her the previous evening.

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His eyes became hard. He was displeased. Women only dress like this for eight days out of every month, and always for the same reason.

In other tribes, the garment is of black, blue, or red stuff, instead of crushed lianas or bark.

But whatever the colour, the reason is the same. Moreover, now that she was nearer, he could see her in detail. Her forehead was bound with a red cord, and her hair was uncombed.

Just his luck ! When he thought himself sure of possessing her, here she was sick with that sickness common to women every moon made by N'gakoura !

She stopped in front of him.

They greeted each other in silence, and sat down side by side.

Why hide any more ? They had nothing to fear for the present. Every one was hunting. The most crowded villages were deserted. The old, the sick, the blind, the women in child-bed, the goats and the chickens alone remained behind.

As for the dogs, every *Djouma* from every village had gone with its master.

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Bissibingui gazed admiringly at Yassiguindja.

How he longed for her ! Really, the sun itself seemed to run in his limbs through the blue cords in which his blood circulated.

But, too, why was she wearing a necklace of three rows of shells ? Why had she heavy rings of red copper on her feet ?

She was charming. A little piece of wood pierced the lobe of her left ear, another was fixed to the wall of her right nostril. These jewels gave her an air of distinction, which suited her alone.

She had flat breasts, broad hips, strong round thighs, and slender ankles. Her hair alone was unworthy of such an admirable face and figure, as a woman in a state of impurity had for the time to put aside all thoughts of elegance.

She too watched him secretly.

Bissibingui abounded with the supple strength which is masculine beauty.

A perfect frame, shoulders and chest thick with muscle, no belly, and long, full, muscular legs.

When he ran, he could pass a *m'bala*, which howls as it flees ! And well she knew

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how virile he was, since those who had only known him once made every effort to keep him, even if they had to descend to entreaties and tears, even if they had to suffer his insults, his brutality, his scorn.

"Bissibingui, I must be on the watch," said Yassiguindja. "I must be on the watch more than ever.

"The sorcerer has declared that Batouala's father died through my fault. He says it is I who sent to him an evil spirit.

"Protect me, Bissibingui, protect me! You are strong. If you do not place yourself between them and me, they will kill me. The magic investigations have begun already.

"So far they have favoured me.

"The other day, they bled a black chicken in my presence. According to custom, they left it to its own devices just before it died.

"At the moment of death, it fell to the left, not to the right.

"You know what that means: Yassiguindja is not guilty, you must search elsewhere for the person who threw a spell on Batouala's father.

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“ What happened ? The elders, after a consultation, refused to admit the evidence of this sign. So now I must expect to be put to the poison tests.

“ I am certainly not afraid of them all. For instance, I shall take the *gou'ndi* without repugnance. I shall even drink much of it. That is the only way to render it harmless.

“ Once free from this second danger, how shall I avoid the others ? It is certain that my torturers will not wish to pay for their lies with the presents which custom demands in such cases. Give me two women, two slaves ! Come now ! They will prefer to pour *latcha* in my eyes. And my eyes will die, for I do not know the antidote which preserves the eyes from the ill effects of *latcha*.

“ Then they will all cry out that N'gakoura has spoken, that they have the proof of my guilt. I shall be beaten. I shall be stoned. All these lusting dogs, who hate me because I have repulsed them formerly, will take advantage of my weakness.

“ Bissibingui, Bissibingui, they will require me to plunge my hands into boiling water !

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They will press a red-hot iron on my loins ! Bissibingui, Bissibingui, I will suffer torture of hunger and thirst ! I shall be cold ! And then they will bury me alive by the side of Batouala's father, so that my death may please him and appease his wrath !

" Bissibingui, I long for you ! You know well how I want you, and you alone.

" Is it my fault, if up till now we have not been able to come together ?

" I am suspected and watched by envious eyes. You, too, are watched, and people are jealous of you. I would not be surprised if I were told that we were being watched at this very moment.

" But, you see, it is in vain to keep up and multiply obstacles, water always runs to water. The very *kagas*, notwithstanding their bulk, cannot prevent two rivers from flowing together. So however far your desire may fall short of mine, I will be yours in a few days, yours and yours alone.

" Decide. . . ."

The sun was less hot. The *tam-tams* and *olifants* uttered invitations. Thus Bissibingui learnt that Batouala awaited his

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coming. Only when he was present would he burn those hunting-grounds, those which lay between the *dacpa* village of *Soumana* and the *n'gapon* village of *Yakidji*.

Yassiguindja went on :

“ You hate me to-day, Bissibingui ? Ah, if I could have prevented the effect of the moon on my blood—you must not laugh at my sincerity—I would have done it gladly to be yours.

“ Unfortunately, we can do nothing for it, we women. When our blood works thus we can but wait. You know that well. And you know too that I want you even more than you can possibly want me. My whole being desires you. I belong to you. You asked for me : I have come. Meanwhile, let us flee. I will cook for you, wash your linen, sweep your hut, clear and sow your plantations—all that, provided that we go away. Let us start ; are you willing ? We will get to *Bangui*, where you will sign on as a *tooroogoo*. Once a *tooroogoo*, what *m'bi* will dare to make any claim against you ? None—not even Batouala.

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"You see it is not for nothing that the commandants understand nothing except what their militiamen wish them to understand. Let us go! I do not want to take poison in my mouth. I do not want to plunge my hands into boiling water. I do not want my loins to shrivel under the hot iron. I do not want my eyes to die. I do not want to die. I am young, strong, and healthy, and I can live through many a rainy season yet. And to live is to be with the man one wants. . . ."

Bissibingui rose and stretched himself.

The sun's bloodshot canoe foundered on the horizon.

The birds sang no longer. The same silence spread abroad which comes at the moment when the sun is about to rise in the morning and just before nightfall.

"Yassiguindja, the words you have spoken are just, and require thinking over. Moreover, I swear to you by N'gakoura that you will be respected.

"But the moment for flight is not yet come. Wait until the end of the hunting. After that I will go to *Bangui* to take service.

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“ As a *tooroogoo*—militiaman, in the speech of the whites—you have a rifle, cartridges, and a great knife bound to the left side by a belt of leather. You are well clothed. Your feet are shod with sandals. You bear *chéchia*. You are paid.

“ And every Sunday, when the *tatalita* has sounded the ‘ dismiss ’ you go and make your little *pe’ndéré* in the villages, where you are admired by the women.

“ To these immediate advantages other and more important attractions are added.

“ For instance, instead of paying the tax, we it is who help to bring it in.

“ We gain our end by pillaging both the villages which owe and also those which have paid their debts.

“ We get the rubber collected. We collect recruits to carry the *sandoukous*.

“ Such is the work of the militiaman.

“ Wherever we go the chiefs and their men burden us with presents to gain our good will.

“ These little attractions sweeten the life of the *tooroogoo*, and make it pleasant, easy, and delightful, all the more so when the Commandant’s knowledge of the language

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of the country where he is is weak—our country and our language.

“ The result is this. Has such-and-such a village showed itself of a grudging spirit ? One of those delightful tales is made up which have neither head nor tail, and is told at length to that excellent Commandant.

“ He, who is always just, is angry, and becomes possessed of second sight. He starts off by imprisoning the entire population—chickens, chiefs, dogs, women, goats, children, slaves, and harvests.

“ Afterwards, chickens, dogs, goats, harvests, and women are sometimes sold by auction. And the money thus obtained is paid in as taxes.

“ Sometimes they share out the goats and poultry again among their friends, unless they make a present of them to the Governor, who will remember their nice behaviour when the time for promotion comes.

“ In the former case, they leave us the dogs and women and goats and crops to share amongst ourselves. . . .

“ To tell the truth, it is only the peace-

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loving commandants who follow such a regrettable procedure.

"It is fortunate that they are not all alike! Without that, where should we be, N'gakoura?"

"However we have warlike commandants. They are the majority. They put you astride a fiery *m'barta* whose only pace is a foot's pace. The boys and their boys follow. And thus we go to war against poor devils who can put up no resistance.

"The expedition over, the commandants send heaps of *bétis* to the Government, *bétis* in which our deeds of prowess and theirs are told at length. A lie does not weigh heavily on our commandants! And every one is happy: we, at having mocked them; they, at having told wonderful stories, born in their imagination alone.

"And with that, I am going away, Yassiguindja. I am wanted everywhere. I am going.

"May your path be smooth wherever you go, Yassiguindja!"

"May your path be smooth wherever you go, Bissibingui!"

She watched him go away, grow smaller

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and disappear. Then she balanced the calabash of food on her head. Then she, too, started slowly on her way.

A soft and starry dusk had spread over the land. The scent of sweet-smelling plants hung in the air. The darkness framed the red glow of the bush-fires.

The moon was in the sky, curved like a throwing-knife, a narrow strip of light. A bright star shone at a distance from it, in the centre of an empty stretch of dark blue.

Peaceful pleasures, soft lights, life in a place where it seemed that nothing wicked should ever be produced, the beauty of life was here : the contemplation of the silence was all that one could want.

But the dull rolling of the *tam-tams*, muffled by contrary winds or by distance, growled on in the night. . . .

CHAPTER EIGHT

BISSIBINGUI is marching in the night.

He carries a bow, arrows, a quiver, and, as a spear, one of those huge *likongos* with broad, heavy blades. He has also two throwing-knives, a capacious wallet rammed tight with victuals, and a dagger held by the strap to the inner side of his left forearm.

So he goes, in the endless night, without fear and without haste ; but at the least noise, eyes and ears are alert and watchful.

How long has he been pushing on into the night, a torch in his right hand ?

He did not know himself. *Boundjous* alone are capable of dividing the time into equal spaces. Still, it is necessary to shut up these distances in a little box in which you see two, or sometimes three, pointers, different in length and speed, moving easily across the numbers.

The *Kosségamba kaga*, the little *Boubou* river—*yabao !* what a good bathe he had

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had in it !—the little village built close to it by one of the chief *Delépous* headmen ; the road towards the Post ; at a *Sagaie*—throw of the *Bamba*, the stable of the Post next to the cemetery in which the whites are buried ; the *Bamba*, then the great bridge which crosses it, towering over the waters ; and finally the Post, with its plantations, the Commandant's kitchen-garden, and the shed in which the chiefs, the headmen, and their men shelter at each rubber market.

Having crossed the *Pombo*, he skirted Batouala's village and fled to one of the desolate huts in which Macoudé the fisherman lived.

He learnt from him exactly where Batouala was.

When he was on the point of returning to the trail, Macoudé added certain dark hints of advice to the news which he had given.

Their very obscurity showed him to what extent his life was threatened.

He must delay no longer. He must act, and that quickly.

At one moment, he thought of not

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accepting the invitation he had received. He thought, on further reflection, that his absence might seem queer. What risk did he run? That of meeting Batouala in the midst of his own people? It was not worth taking a false step.

The good wind! It brought him the raucous bray of the trumpets, the crackling of the flames, and the call of the *li'nghas* as they echoed and re-echoed.

He must act or die. Act! Where? and how?

It was fine. *Tam-tams*. Bats. Owls. Glow-worms. Distant fires. A sky studded with stars. And dew, wet dew.

Ah! How fine it was!

Yes, but . . . what decision was he to make? Certainly he would not be killed that evening. Assassinations are not carried out before witnesses.

Agreed. But, for his part, how was he to get rid of Batouala?

Hum! a little *likou'ndov* would do well. He would mix it secretly with Batouala's food and drink. To act the panther has its attraction, without doubt; nor is the use of the assegai to be scorned. But these

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two methods leave traces : not so the *likou'ndov*.

Bissibingui was walking in a great red glare which, fanned by the wind, seemed to rise to heaven at a bound, his eyes fixed to the ground to avoid knocking against tree-trunks or stones.

He had thrown away his torch.

While he went forward, pondering, from the direction of *Pouyamba*, from every direction fire was scaling the *kaga* which it had besieged.

The flames advanced, licking their way, winding and jumping. They clung to rocks in places where dead bushes had grown, enveloping them little by little with flame and only leaving them when they had collapsed, lighting the darkness by their fall.

Where and how could he kill Batouala ?

Await his chance ? No. Provoke him ? There you are ! And all the difficulty lay there.

One last effort ! Having reached the top of the *kaga*, all the flames joined in a last flare, from which a cloud of red and blackish smoke went up.

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He would kill Batouala, or Batouala would kill him.

Certainly to kill seemed to him far pleasanter than to be killed. Life has a charm when we are young and women lend themselves to our desires.

He looked round him. Fires everywhere. *Kagas* flamed like torches stuck up in the night.

He must kill Batouala !

Come, come, come ! . . . And hunting accidents ! They are frequent enough for people to give them a little thought from time to time !

What ! You aim at an animal, and you kill a man ! It is not granted to every one to be skilful ! The best shot can miss his target ! Ehé !

And bush-fires !

How many poor people were burnt to death every year ! The fire devours everything, without knowing what it is doing or where it is going. One had only to doze too long somewhere in a hunting ground. The fire would pass, respecting nothing but water—and scowling with fury at that !—and all would be over ! . . .

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A bush-fire or a hunting accident then.
He sniffed.

He looked round him, every sense alert. In the evening every turn of the path might conceal an ambushed enemy. To be cautious is only wise.

Ah, an ant-heap !

A second was placed longitudinally on top of it. He went to the right because this last mushroom growth pointed to the right.

Farther on he found, shoulder high, a broken branch, then, at his feet, a piece of cut wood, and later a plant from the bush. These objects pointed to the left. He turned to the left. A little path. It was there.

He obeyed these pointing signs mechanically, for the *boundjous* think in vain that the bush is dead. They are wrong.

From morn till eve, from evening till morning, it talks like an old woman.

The mumbling of the *tam-tam*, together with the double boom of the *li'nghas*, the call of the olifants or trumpets, certain cries which imitate certain birds so well as to deceive you, flame signals sent from height to height, the grass twisted parallel to the

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road, two ant-heaps, one placed upon the other following an invariable custom, leaves plaited in a certain way, the bit of wood crossing another from point to point—musical, shining, or motionless—that is the living language of uncounted wealth.

Praised be the bush ! Do people think it dead ? It is alive, full of life, and only speaks to its children, and to them alone. It uses what language it pleases to talk to the wide spaces under its command, it uses smoke, sounds, smells, inanimate objects to address the spaces where trees grow and grass flourishes, and wild cattle graze.

Praise to the bush ! The bush of the *kagas* and the marshes, the bush of the forests and the plains !

A dog barked forth insults and threats. A rubber-wood torch sizzled. Two drunken voices. It was Batouala, his old mother, and the little ginger dog with the very pointed ears, Djouma.

Bissibingui had arrived.

But how was he to kill Batouala ? Hunting accident or bush-fire ?

Besides, was it not more urgent for the moment to think more of self-defence than

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of attacking, since he had unsuspectingly walked into the clumsy trap that had been set for him, in spite of the warnings he had received ?

CHAPTER NINE

BISSIBINGUI soon realized the extent of his rashness.

He had before him a drunken man, who had caught him in a trap, in which he had allowed himself to be taken like a child.

Everything seemed to have been foreseen.

He was in a clearing, far from the tracks which follow or cross the *Pombo*.

Witnesses? Not one. Or rather, yes, two, Batouala's "mamma" and Djouma, the little ginger dog.

But you might as well say there were none. No mother ever betrays her child, unless she be unnatural. And Djouma could be relied on, for in the memory of man no dog has been heard to speak.

Then open your eye, Bissibingui, my friend, and let it be your best one. If not! . . .

He sat down by himself, stuck his *likongo* in the ground, and loosened his dagger.

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He refused the food and millet-beer which were offered him, and pretended not to notice the disappointment of his hosts.

"Macoudé has already gorged me with potatoes and smoked fish and *kéné*. I can eat no more, Batouala. You don't believe me? Feel my wallet. It is bulging with victuals."

He caressed Djouma, who had come to lick his hands. The dog rolled on the ground and barked with joy, wagging his tail and playfully snapping and biting at the fingers which had stroked him.

But Djouma was a dog like all dogs, that is to say, he was beneath consideration. So Bissibingui stopped playing with this inconsiderable trifle. And as he was giving some time to thought, he kicked it away.

Meanwhile, getting drunker and drunker, Batouala rose to dance a few steps of the love-dance.

He thought he was dancing, but he only swayed as he stood, his head and legs heavy as lead, his eyes red and bloodshot. Then he knocked up against a stump and measured his length on the ground.

BATOUALA

Djouma immediately started rushing round him and barking. That was a good joke, and one which he, as a dog, could appreciate.

"Once upon a time, just such an accident happened to Iili'ngou," said Batouala as he got up. He then burst out laughing.

"In fact, I will tell you all about Iili'ngou, as you probably do not know a single word of the story to which I refer.

"Listen.

"At that time, as nowadays, the earth had no boundaries, with its bush, its forests, its rivers, its *mourous*, and its *m'balas*.

"Men existed in those days. And as well as them, the cold.

"The men would have been happy had it not been for the cold. It was all they had to complain of. It made their limbs stiff. It cut short their sleep.

"They grumbled and complained so much that Ipeu, the moon, sent Iili'ngou, whose other name is Séla-fou, and entrusted him with the task of teaching men the use of fire.

BATOUALA

“ The story of Iili'ngou's stay on earth is a long one.

“ In order to go quicker, Ipeu let him down there by means of an immeasurable cord, to which a *li'ngha* was tied, and the only way to get this cord drawn up again was for Iili'ngou to smite the *li'ngha* blows with a *tam-tam*.

“ From Iili'ngou, man soon knew that fire not only drives away cold, but that it also warms the limbs, cooks food, and lights up the darkness.

“ He had become their best friend. They asked him about everything that seemed mysterious.

“ Thus it was that fear gradually invaded the liver of man, as he saw the living beings which surrounded him disappear.

“ When these animals lay down one day to rise no more, whither went their spirit ?

“ When that happened, it was in vain to talk to them, caress them, or flatter them. They replied no more in their language. They stayed there, silent and motionless. The flies crawled up their nostrils. And then, alas, they changed into a filthy, crawling mess of insects and worms.

BATOUALA

“ They appealed once more to the knowledge of Iili'ngou, who, not knowing what reply to make to calm their apprehensive fears, dashed off to find Ipeu, his queen, and said to her :

“ ‘ The human race is anxious. They fear death, and beseech me to ask you if they are subject to the laws which govern the animals.’

“ ‘ Hurry back and reassure them, my excellent Iili'ngou.

“ ‘ I have made them in my image. I, too, die, but to be born again, eight nights after my disappearance.

“ ‘ Let them remember that well. And in order that they may believe my words, you shall live among them henceforth.’

“ The cord let Iili'ngou down again, astride on his *li'ngha*.

“ He was holding the cord in both hands, thinking at the same time of a crowd of other matters.

“ Then he thought he had arrived, so let go of the cord and *li'ngha* and fell into space !

“ Of course he died of his fall. Since then, men die also.”

BATOUALA

Bissibingui was listening to Batouala. His thoughts wandered and wandered. Batouala unveiled mysteries for him which only the very old are allowed to know. Ouh ! Mistrust ! His own, Bissibingui's own death was decided then ! Suspicion ! He was at the mercy of chance and nothing more. Perhaps in a moment even . . .

" You talk of fire, Batouala ! Do you pretend that Iili'ngou came down to teach men at the order of Ipeu ? It is possible.

" All the same, such is not the opinion held by the tribes who live on the banks of the *Nionbangui*.

" According to them, fire was discovered by the earliest ancestor of Djouma.

" One day, the first dog was playing at scratching up the earth. He had already dug a pretty deep hole, when he suddenly gave a howl of pain. He hopped first on one paw, then on the other, and whined.

" His curiosity aroused by these unusual noises and gestures, his master approached the hole, put in his foot and—*iahou* ! Burnt too, he had just discovered fire.

" That is what the *Yakoma* canoe-men told me."

BATOUALA

"Your *Yakomas* are swollen boils, full of lies, Bissibingui.

"It is thanks to Ili'ngou, I tell you, and to him alone, that men owe fire. He, too, it was who built the earth, heaped up the *kagas*, and drew out the river-beds. But it is Ipeu who made the first man and the first woman. . . .

"I know many more things, Bissibingui, many things which are not good for you to know, for you already know more things than a man of your age ought to know."

Bissibingui did not take up the threat. Word is not deed. He was content to watch Batouala's least movement, without worrying too much about his mother's sneers.

"Do you know that Ipeu, the moon, is the enemy of Lolo, the sun?" went on Batouala. "You don't, do you?"

"Ah, well, long, long ago Lolo, who is both man and woman, used to live on good terms with Ipeu.

"At the time of which I am speaking, Ipeu and Lolo both had their *mammas*, whom they loved more than can be told.

"As Ipeu's *mamma* was too cold, and Lolo's too hot, Lolo took into his charge

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Akéra, Ipeu's mamma, while Ipeu agreed to look after Lolo's.

"This exchange proved disastrous. Being used to cold, Akéra, the old lady, died of too much heat; and being used to heat, Lolo's mamma died of cold.

"The hatred which divides Lolo and Ipeu dates from that moment. And that is why, although Ipeu's power is greater than Lolo's, and although she compels him to flee when evening comes, that is why she hides from him when he is burning the plains.

"You did not know that, eh, Bissibingui? And did you know that the *a'mbé répi* which you see shining up there like innumerable silver coins, or winking like crowds and crowds of eyes, did you know that the *a'mbé répi* are only holes through which the rain drops pass when it rains?

"Formerly women who wished to be mothers—and all used to desire that, formerly—were not allowed to eat either goat or tortoise. We used to know then that those who fed on goat would be smitten with barrenness, while those who ate tortoise

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would only have prematurely old children, walking with the slow gait of the tortoise. We knew also that our forefathers could provoke rain at will. They could do it, but they only used their power at the right season, when the sowing time drew near.

“When the sowing moon rode in the sky, they used to spread salt in handfuls on a great brazier. The rain did not hesitate to fall, for salt has attracted water, which it loves, for all time.

“We were also taught that the *do'ndorro* is an evil spirit, who inhabits people's bellies. When your belly aches it is *do'ndorro* who is torturing, *do'ndorro* who is up to mischief.

“And N'gakoura, N'gakoura by whom we swear as much as we can, do you know N'gakoura?

“He has a good courageous wife. And his children are more in number than the grass of the bush. The two eldest, Nadoulou and Naugodjo, help their father to rule his villages.

“The N'gakoura family is full of kindness towards men. It generally carries out

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the requests made to it, always on condition that its labours are followed by presents of every kind.

“ Their only enemy is Kolikongbo. You realize that only too much, alas ! For since the beginning the wretched inhabitants of the earth have paid for the crockery smashed in their fights, Kolikongbo killing N’gakoura’s friends, and N’gakoura those of Kolikongbo.

“ And Dad’ra, Dad’ra, the swift moving brother of the *a’mbé répi*, who is like them ! Dad’ra, who is seen moving between earth and sky on certain warm, fine nights ! Dad’ra, who disappears making a report like a gun—have you ever been able to learn what Dad’ra is ?

“ No, no, no ! You will know perhaps if you grow to white-haired old age, which I doubt if you will do, for I am one of those who think that your bones will not get very old.

“ When you want to live year after year, you must not love your neighbour’s wife too well, or be too sought after by your neighbour’s wives.

“ But then, come ! I prefer to remain

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silent. I feel that I am saying more than I ought. It is true that it is in your interest. But I am drunk this evening. I am saying more than I would like to say.

“Before shutting my mouth, however, I will tell you the legend of Kolikongbo—Trollé, to call him by his real name.

“Kolikongbo is so small that he is really hardly ever seen, and some go so far as to say that he exists only in imagination.

“Nevertheless, he does exist. It is no lie. If he did not exist, why should every dwarf be nicknamed Kolikongbo?

“Where does Kolikongbo live? On the heights, in the caves, in the middle of the woods. He lives on honey, ignama-root, the fruit of the rubber-tree, and that choice meat, elephant.

“Were it not for his height, he would be like you and I. For he is just like a man as regards his feet, legs, and arms, and the rest. There is one passing remark to make, though. Except for his head, you may search all over his body for the shadow of a single hair. If you find a single one, you will surprise me!

“However small he is, Kolikongbo is

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extraordinarily strong. He is stronger than all men and animals put together, so strong that if you meet him you must take care not to stretch out your hand. His handshake would tear out your fingers.

“Kolikongbo has plantation upon plantation! He is rich! And he is powerful! It is impossible to imagine his wealth and power!

“But it is in vain that he is wealthy, that he has children who equal the human race in number, for it is impossible for him to find enough labourers to keep up his enormous plantations.

“In the rainy season, indeed, nothing will induce him to leave the caves in which he rests. But once the fine season has come back, he girds his waist with the promiscuous collection of leaves and grass which act as his loin-cloth, and armed with a huge *li'kongo* and a wallet such as has never been seen, Kolikongbo sets out on his adventures.

“Then all roads are good for him, and they all belong to him. He crosses the rocky sun-scorched plains, and there he hatches his terrible plots. He comes and goes, sweating and clamouring. He makes

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you wander from morning till night, turning every living soul from your path, leading you away from the villages. . . .

“ In the dry season, there are few people on the roads. There is hunting in the dry season. Red and bleeding meat is worth more than all the plantations in the world.

“ Iéhé ! What’s that ? See ! Some one appears on one of the roads which Kolikongbo is following at the moment when the sun, high in the heavens, is hotter than boiling water.

“ This man is so tired that he does not notice that Kolikongbo, walking in his footsteps, draws near him, comes level with him, and, ha !—knocks him out with a blow on the neck which would take the horns off an ox.

“ His victim falls, his eyes full of a thousand stars, his ears full of a buzzing sound like a bee-hive, his throat raw and panting. He falls, his arms outstretched, and goes to sleep breathing like a black-smith’s bellows.

“ His victim is asleep. No time to lose. Rapidly Kolikongbo pops him into the enormous wallet from which he is never

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separated, and runs as hard as ever he can to his plantations.

“ There he re-awakens the sleeper.

“ ‘ Will you work on my plantations ? I will feed you lavishly. You shall have wives, boys, chickens and goats. I will be responsible that you are not unhappy.

“ ‘ But if, as I hope you will, you accept my offer, I warn you that you must be prepared never to see again your village or any of your belongings.

“ ‘ Do you accept ? Reply.’

“ Generally however, tempting though it is, Kolikongbo’s offer is refused. Once more, ba !—a club falls once more on the back of the wretched man’s neck and he is packed up again and carried back in a few swift strides to the place where he was assaulted.

“ When our friend regains consciousness, his neck aches, his head is heavy and his legs wobble. He is covered with bruises, and he tries to remember why. Try as much as you like ! Kolikongbo does things well. You will find nothing.

“ Meanwhile, if your perceptions were finer and you knew how to look, you would

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see Kolikongbo quite near you. With his ears pricked up and his eyes alert he listens, watches, and waits.

"What do you think of that legend, Bissibingui?"

"I think that it is curious, Batouala. But do you want me to say? As far as I can see, sunstroke and the legend of Kolikongbo are one and the same."

He started laughing quietly.

He, too, knew some stories. He even longed to tell him one of them, which revealed the origin of sleeping-sickness.

But that legend was too long. It would do for another time.

Djouma had for a moment been growling between his curled back lips, dull insults in his dog-language.

He suddenly rushed towards the opening of the pathway, and stood there till a handful of men had come out of it.

They were some *n'gapous* from Yakidji, who had lost their way in the night.

What luck! Their presence reassured Bissibingui, and relieved his anxiety.

He quickly collected a heap of leaves and lay down on them to sleep.

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He was sleepy. He would not be killed that night. The best thing to do was to take advantage of the respite which chance was giving him.

For a moment, with his eyes already shut, he thought :

“ It will be light to-morrow.”

Then his head nodded slowly. They chattered beside him. His breathing became deep and regular.

He was asleep. . . .

CHAPTER TEN

BUSH-ROADS, so wet and cool under their morning dew ; damp smells and soft scents, rustling grass, murmuring noises, and the hurried shiver of the wind in the leaves ; mists falling in soft rain, steam—hills and valleys rising towards the pallid sun ; smoke, sounds of life, *tam-tams*, calls, cries, awakenings !

Ah, the birds are singing too, high above the trees ! The flight of the vultures twists and turns too high ! Too high is the sky, whose azure blue seems colourless in this immense light !

What a gorgeous day ! *Goussou*, the bush, the whole bush is going to burn ! *Iéhé*, the *m'balas*, it is no longer time for trumpeting ! You *bé'ngués* and you *vounghbas*, you will do well not to stuff your bellies with greedy jaws ! To us, antelopes ! To us, *cibissis* and *to'ndorrotos* ! Roll up in a ball ! Bristle your spines, *to'ndorrotos* ! The fire cares naught for all that. *Gogonas*, flee lowing ! Flee in herds disordered by

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fear, flee, tails erect, rushing and leaping, gallop, swifter than the arrow, swifter than the wind, gallop as if you had suddenly heard lord *bamara* roar behind you !

Flee, too, *onalas* and *darra'mbas* ! Take fright at the shadow of your long ears and everything, put trust only in the swiftness of your zigzag course and flee, flee ! Fear the whole tribe of Djouma's fierce brothers.

Crouch no more in the folds of the ground, brown as your body. No more deception ! Even your burrows are unsafe. Go straight on ahead towards the place where no blackish smoke proclaims that the fire is eating up the bush. You must flee, flee, flee ! . . .

What a beautiful day ! A beautiful day ! The fire-drive cannot but bring in plenty of game ! It is true, at the counting, no *kolos* will be seen. For these beasts whose very long legs and very long neck tower above the highest grasses are accustomed to live over there in the far distance, between the *Ouahm* and *Kabo*, between *Kabo* and *W'Délé*, among plains rich in prickly plants, which are their food.

BATOUALA

Ah ! the *kolos*, with their tall and spotty bodies !

Another thing which you will not see either is the *bassaragba*, the massive *bassaragba*, with its snout adorned with two unequal horns.

The *bassaragba*, its little eyes red with cruelty, which see so imperfectly the ugliness of its huge muscle-bound neck, its fearful armour, *yaboo* !

Has it seen you ? Rrou ! it rushes straight at you, straight ! Nothing stops its charge. It breaks, crushes, tears away and uproots everything as it comes, thorn-bushes, mari-gots, trees, creepers, and everything.

Woe to him whom he pursues, woe to him ! Woe to him who wanders over the pastures on which in turn he feeds and chews the cud ! Let him look out, whoever he is ! Let him invoke the all-powerful protection of N'gakoura ! And if by chance he should happen upon the still smoking droppings of a *bassaragba*, let him especially take care lest he go and cry out, in view of their enormous size, " Ouch ! How big is it ! " or his account is settled. Oh, yes !

Blowing, gross, growling, grunting and

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angry, his belly tight stretched and rumbling with the perpetual *donoorro* of his digestion, *bassaragba* arrives, tosses him, turns him upside down, and makes him burst like a dry bamboo by lying on him, gets up, and tramples on him, and only goes away at last, *patala-patala*, when all that is left of the corpse is a bleeding hash, the remains of which will be shared by the jackals at nightfall.

So it is better in such circumstances to wrinkle up your nose, spit disgustedly, and say, "Uffe! what a stink!"

Hardly has he heard these disrespectful words when *bassaragba*, smitten with shame, slinks off as fast as he can. . . .

No *kolos* and *bassaragbas*, but what does that matter! You hunt what you find. You hunt for the sake of hunting. It is the sport of the brave, the struggle of man against beast, of skill against brute force.

There is plenty of danger, so hunting is the best training for war. Let who can prove his skill, his courage, his strength, and his endurance. A sure eye is necessary: you must be agile, have a supple, continuous, untiring gait, which does not leave you out

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of breath, or make you stop or pant, you must be able to run for a long time after the beast you have wounded.

Oualas, *cicissis*, *darra'mbas*, *t'ondorrotos* are easy to catch with dogs or to capture with snares of stretched *bandas*. The meshes of the nets are irresistible traps for them.

But if you can hardly catch certain small species of antelope in this way, you cannot proceed thus if it is a matter of a *boxobo*-antelope or horse-antelope, or *voungbas*, or *gogonas* and *m'balas*.

Unless they fall into specially prepared pits, *gogonas* and *voungbas* must be tired out, forced on, and driven to bay.

The most dangerous moment with the *gogona* is when he is at bay.

Feeling death replacing the blood which is falling, drop by drop, from his wound, he faces his assailant, lowers his head, and charges. . . .

Thinking of such things, Bissibingui and Batouala, the former behind the latter, marched along peaceably.

Djouma followed them, his ears lowered. Every minute *m'bis*, *n'gapous* and *dacpas*

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joined them. They were armed with spears, arrows and throwing-knives.

Their chief had a head-dress of feathers, his body was stained with red wood and anointed with palm-oil—for a hunting day is a feast day—they sang as they walked, most of them accompanied by dogs as red of coat and as snappish as Djouma.

It was fine. The wind, a soft, wet wind, blowing from the place of the sun's rising to that of his setting, cooled the bush. Lolo had still far to go before reaching mid-heaven. The *tam-tam* of the *li'nghas* mounted, laughing, the pathless space which goes up to the blue villages where he lives. The heights of *Biga-kaka* were no more than a tiny point on the horizon. They had crossed them in the morning.

A beautiful day !

The little band split up at the meeting of two paths which lead, one to the village of *Soumana*, the other to the *n'gapou* villages which were under the authority of Yakidji, a former vassal of Senoussou.

Each one rallied to his post, so as to be able to carry out the work fixed for him at the given time. You either watch, knock

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down the game, or light fires. Those who hunt, who really hunt, and who kill, are only a small number.

Then some of the men went as far as the river *Dangoua*, which joins the *Goutia* to flow into the *Kili'mbi*.

There they had to kindle the fire.

Others stopped this side of the river, at the village of *Gaoda*, the chief *dacpa-yéra*, on the banks of the *Massaoua'nga*. Others, again, went to their chosen positions. These stretched from the river *Goubadjia* to the river *Gobo*. Batouala and Bissibingui both formed part of the last band.

The provisions were unpacked, the *garabos*, full of tobacco to the top, were passed round, and while Djouma and his companions improved their acquaintance after the dirty manner of their kind, the men ate and drank solidly. Then they started talking of one thing and another, squatting on their heels, chin on knee.

"People make out," said Batoula, "that *bamaras* and *mourous* hunt in packs.

"It is true that the *bamara* goes on the trail in company with his mate. It is also true that when she has whelped and is

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giving milk to her young, the male agrees to feed his whole family.

“ But this family life does not last long. As soon as the cubs are strong enough to fend for themselves, father and mother *bamara* point out to them that they are acting wisely in relieving them of their presence.

“ The young lions in fact, like all young people, are insupportable. They desire more than they can eat. Their hunger never seems appeased. Now, he who wishes to have, must work. *Douhout . . . dout-dout !* Father *Bamara* roars, rolls his awful eyes, bristles his short mane, bares his claws, and stalks far and wide, lashing his sides angrily with his tail.

“ There is yet another legend, more enduring than the first.

“ Some believe that lions roar when hunting.

“ What folly ! It is talking without thinking. Let's see. Does not the hunter who follows the trail of an antelope make as little noise as possible ? Why should the *bamara* act otherwise ? If he roared, would not all the animals whom he wished to

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surprise be warned? They would be off on the spot!

“No. The *bamara* only roars to express his joy, once he has seized or torn in pieces the prey which he desired. *Douhout!* . . . *dout-dout!* All goes well. My hunger is appeased, or soon will be. I feel happy. I want to play at chasing my shadow in the sun. My roaring is going to terrify the *gogonas* and antelopes in the neighbourhood. *Douhout!* . . . What fools the animals are! After all the time for which they have known my voice, and they are used to hearing it, they do not yet know that it is when I roar that I am least to be feared! There! . . . My belly is satisfied. I am strong, and I want to go and amuse myself. Let's go up to the top of this *kaga*. *Douhout!* . . . Ah! How I laugh! From the place where I am, I can see the whole district. And what do I see?

“I see herds of *gogonas* fleeing away in the distance across the plains. They flee because they have heard me roar, poor fools! I must laugh! *Douhout! dout-dout!* And now let me find a place where I can digest in coolness and in peace. . . .”

BATOUALA

“ And don't you think that the people who say that *m'balas* never charge men, but flee, on the contrary, at the report of a gun, are as mad as Kosséyéndé, Batouala ? ” said Bissibingui.

“ Such is my opinion, and for good reasons.

“ Some rainy seasons ago, I was staying at *Kémo*.

“ A great white hunter, who only hunted elephants, was living there for the time being.

“ He was called Coquelin.

“ Coquelin was one of those *boundjous* such as are rarely seen. He was as tall as a *sara* or a *n'gama*, and his eyes, which were the colour of fine weather, shone in his face like the sun in the sky.

“ He wore his hair long, falling on his neck, and a long beard, and his strength was so great that he could have felled a *gogona* with a blow from his fist.

“ We liked him well. He lived like us poor blacks. He ate our food. He had only a *bogbo* as his bed, like us. Stretched on this mat he used to sleep at night.

“ One morning, a herd of *m'balas* was

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reported to him. They were laying waste the plantations of the *gobou* villages near *Ouadda*, alongside the *Ouah'mbéé*, rich in caymans.

"He took only two rifles, one of which he entrusted to the best of his beaters, and the other he loaded in both barrels and kept himself. He then started !

"Luck favoured him.

"The same day, just before sunset, he found fresh spoor, which he followed.

"What a row ! There they were without a doubt ! Cracklings, snapping of branches, and trumpeting ! One could hear the continuous rumbling of their digestion. They were wallowing in the mud, spraying themselves with water. For they had fled from the sun into the woods, near a *marigot*.

"Followed by his loader, the white made his way towards them by slow degrees. At last he saw one which was leaning against a tree looking in his direction, having scented him without doubt.

"What an enormous pair of tusks ! He aimed at him and . . .

"Ha ! The wounded elephant was on him already.

BATOUALA

"You live quickly in such moments as that. If fear does not kill you at once, you only feel it afterwards, when you have time.

"He leapt to one side to avoid the huge beast, did avoid him, stood his ground, brought his rifle to his shoulder once more, pressed the trigger. . . . Tac! A misfire!

"What was he to do? His loader? Gone, taking with him his second rifle! Flee? Impossible. He could only await death. And it came, did death. There it is—in those bright little eyes, in that curled and threatening trunk, in those ears, spread open like palm-leaves, in those sharp squeals of rage. Death is there. Death! . . .

"What happened next? No one will ever know exactly, since no one was left there.

"It is commonly agreed that the poor white hunter was tossed into the air by the *m'bala* which went and died at several spear-throws from its victim, who was left motionless on the ground, his belly pierced with a tusk-thrust.

BATOUALA

“ When he came to his senses, Coquelin, who was still quite alone, felt weak, ah ! so weak. . . .

“ On hands and knees he dragged himself to the river, where he washed his frightful wound.

“ His intestines hung out over his belly. He put them back. And then, when night came, he wrote certain signs on a piece of paper.

“ Later, we found out from the whites over there that they meant :

“ ‘ I shall never see *Kémo* again.’

“ He was wrong. He saw *Kémo* again, for he was taken back there quickly. He did not seem to suffer unduly. But his face was very pale, and his body was burning hot. He had pinched nostrils and thin and bloodless lips.

“ Nevertheless, he did not seem to suffer too much. He did not complain.

“ Quickly he was placed on some rugs, on a boat which took him down to *Bangui*, passing over the dangerous *Bakou'ndon* rapids in the night. It was the flood-time.

“ In vain did the *doctorros* of *Bangui* call on all their magic arts to care for him.

BATOUALA

"There was nothing more to do. Do'ndorro had already putrefied his belly.

"He cried now, the white hunter. He cried. His swollen belly looked like a skin full of victuals. Every night the 'Fathers' woke him up, reciting incantations to conjure out the evil spirit.

"All was in vain. The hand of Koli-kongbo weighed heavy upon him.

"He died, eight days after he arrived at *Bangui*."

The sun flamed in mid-heaven. The blackbirds announced the fact on every side. And the three great gusts of wind, rushing in from the colourless horizon, passed as they do at this moment every day, and carried away in wide, whirling spirals dirt, dead leaves and dust.

This wind had blown in from the place of the sun's rising to disappear where the sun sets. And here it was coming back from the latter place as a light breeze.

Then to the right and to the left, from valleys, heights and marshes, trumpets, *olifants*, and *tam-tams* boomed forth. And suddenly a wild clamour :

"*Iaha !*"

BATOUALA

The signal ! The signal ! The hunt is open ! The hunt begins !

A smoke rose from about the river *Dangona*.

Was it really smoke ?

Yes. Yes ! Thin, at first, hardly perceptible, its blackish thread grows more distinct, spreads out in the sky.

Spear-heads could be beaten against the blades of throwing-knives.

“ *Iaha !* ”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

I *AHA!* the signal! Look, the signal! The fire is started, the brutal, many-tongued fire, which warms and burns, the fire which turns the game out of their ambush, which destroys snakes, frightens lions, lowers the pride of plants and trees. The fire which clears the suitable ground for next sowing, and enriches it as it passes.

Ah! who shall tell of the fire? Who will praise this sun brought down to earth as it should be praised, with words expressing its warmth and generosity: sometimes single, generally of uncounted tongues, shining day and night, in spite of wind and rain?

Praised must be its moving brightness, its changing face, its advancing heat, soft, insistent, unbearable, and secret.

Glory be to the fire!

Does the sower of the dust close your eyes? The fire takes its place beside the sleeper. It purrs, surrounds him softly

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with the meshes of its warmth, and so carries him off, freed from all care by sleep's miniature death, to those lands of dreams whence you return at every dawn.

Are you doubled up with fever? Do you shiver with cold? The fire restores the blood circulating in the blue veins of your arms to its proper course.

It is the fire which makes you perspire! It is the fire whose shining caress massages your stiffened limbs! It is like a healing balm, so soft is its touch.

The muscles gradually grow flexible, they actually work freely. Fever and tiredness disappear. You no longer feel cold. The rain is welcome to fall outside! The fire is always there, its smoke driving off the darting flight of the mosquitoes, and its radiant heat keeping out the damp.

Are you lonely and sad? Do you need company? It is all you want: good comrade, friend, *ouandja*, confidant. It warms your heart as well as your limbs, draws out and, in fact, provokes confidences.

Near it, and by its aid, you always make a good hot meal. And like every good

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meal, this meal soothes, appeases, and delights you. Its whole being urges you to repose. Its gay dry flickering invites you to tell your secrets.

So who shall praise the fire as it should be praised? And, above all, who will sing its fine red song, when, wrapped in fire—vast, swift, far-reaching, many-shaped—it rushes over the bush, over the *kagas*, in wild confusion, its forces streaming with sparks, with that mighty disordered din, heavy with the crackling of the trees that it strikes down?

Who shall tell the song of the bush-fire? It is here and there, and there again, and there, and still farther too. It never stays still. It eats up the lonely spaces in a second. It leaps from plant to plant. It comes nearer. Anyone who is patient will see it soon. A short time more, just a little time, and you will hear its angry roar, which is over there, everywhere where the smoke is!

But . . . but! Where is it going? Look! Is it not following the river *Pougou* towards the village of *Soumara*?

Hé! *Poupou*. My friend the wind!

BATOUALA

Poupou, my *ouandja*, beat back the fire from the village of *Gaoda*, I beseech you ! May N'gakoura favour us ! If not . . .

Ah ! here it comes again ! All is for the best ! Look, the fire is coming back, and the smoke is growing thicker ! The air is full of the scent of aromatic plants. Let us sharpen knives and spears for the last time ! It is time !

The *tam-tam* of the *li'nghas* ! What does it say ?

Wild cattle . . . terrified by the fire, are galloping . . . towards the village of *Nibani*. . . . What more ? . . . There are . . . in the village . . . beaters . . . and fire-lighters. . . . These latter . . . will not hesitate to set fire . . . to the part of the bush entrusted . . . to their care. . . .

Iaha ! iaha ! the talk of the *li'nghas* is good talk ! *Iaha !* From the village of *Nibani* smoke goes up—black smoke.

What vultures ! . . . What smoke clouds ! The sky is no longer visible. The smoke and the vultures have veiled it. They have also veiled the sun. Nothing is left but smoke and vultures ! The abundance of vultures proves the abundance of the game !

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Look ! Three of them together are diving straight for the earth ! What are they carrying off ? Long live the hunt ! . . .

All these exclamations were hurled back and forth amid an indescribable medley of shouting.

The crowd went on increasing. The swarm and the chaos increased. The lords and commons of the *m'bis* villages were there. Porro and Ouorro, Batouala's head men, were joking with their *mokoundji*. The three *n'gapou* chiefs, Yakidji, surnamed Cambassère, Nibani, and Yéréton'ngou, were also in evidence.

As for Bissibingui, he was amusing himself at the expense of Kosséyéndé, the madman.

Poor Kosséyéndé ! How had he been able to drag himself as far as the river *Gobo* ?

He was hardly able to keep on his legs, and then only by leaning on a stick.

Poor Kosséyéndé ! *Koboholo*, the sleeping-sickness, had wasted his flesh so that he looked like a living skeleton. His great bony head wobbled on his thin neck with its knotted and tortured veins. The sick-

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ness, which had turned his hair red, made his eyes glisten in their hollow sockets. And he himself trembled in every limb, seized already by the chill of death.

All the same, when hands on hips this Kosséyéndé tried to dance, and his knees knocked one against the other, a blast of irrepressible laughter went up.

Then he suddenly stopped, and drew from his wallet two porcupines of the size of one's fist.

A circle was formed round the *to'ndorrotos*.

The little animals had gained their feet. The *m'bis* and the *n'gapous* present clinked their spears together gently, iron to iron and blade against blade, until they started dancing gently, beating time with their snouts to the regular sound of the metal.

*To'ndorroto, To'ndorroto,
Ddo, ddo,
To'ndorroto!*

Ding . . . ding . . . clam . . . clam!
. . . went the blades—clam, clam, ding,
ding!

BATOUALA

Oh, porcupine, oh, porcupine,
Dance, dance,
Oh, porcupine !

Meanwhile, hastened by the breeze from the plains, the bush-fires and the smoke were gaining on the river *Gobo*.

That mattered little to Kossyééndé. He laughed with his mouth wide open, did Kossyééndé. He laughed till he cried.

Ah ! the *boundjous* may know almost everything, but they do not know that *to'ndorrotos* are susceptible to music, and that they dance in their way as naturally as a dog swims when it is thrown into the water.

To'ndorroto, To'ndorroto,
Ddo, ddo,
To'ndorroto !

Clam . . . clam . . . ding . . . ding ! . . .

He laughed so hard that his ribs bulged under his skin as though he would burst. He laughed, and laughed, and laughed. Hiccoughing took the place of laughter. And suddenly he crumpled up into the

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grass, on his back, his eyes turned up and his mouth foaming.

To'ndorroto, To'ndorroto !

Stand up, every one ! Stand up ! The panting breath of the fire grows fuller, hotter, roasting hot. Its fumes choke one. Ouh !

Are the cattle-pits well camouflaged with branches ? Yes. Everything is beautifully ready. To your posts, marksmen ! The only thing to do is to wait, spear in hand and eyes hard under frowning brows.

Rustlings, cracklings, snappings, explosions, cries. Then ashes, bits of dead grass and leaves, swarms of bees, flights of little birds and insects of all kinds : horse-flies, butterflies, locusts, flies, crickets. And then more and yet more cinders.

The wind urges on the speed of the fire. Flames become visible. Their long, wide tongues lick the rank dry grass, which makes a popping noise.

A tumult ! *Cibissis !* More noises ! Antelopes, wild pigs and *oualas !* This is feasting ! This is joy ! *Djonk !*

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flash ! Two, three, five *sagaies* pierce the same animal ! The blood smokes ! Ah ! What a good smell of blood ! And how it excites you ! And how it intoxicates !

Antelopes ! *Cibissis* ! *Bibris* ! Let us kill that kind of pig with long hard spikes, which rolls up in a ball, like the *to'ndorroto* !

Blood ! blood everywhere ! The hunt is a fierce, red dance. Bah ! another *ouala* !

Lo ! . . . Look out ! . . . a *mourou* !

. . . Flee for your lives ! . . . Quick, to that tree . . . in this thorn-bush. . . . Hurry up ! . . . Where is shelter to be found ? A *mourou* ! . . . a *mourou* ! . . . flee for your lives !

Bissibingui had no time to understand or to think. The barking of the dogs, the shouts of their masters ; the flames, the noise they made, their heat, the intoxication brought by the sight of blood and the violent actions to which he and his companions had given themselves up, all this tumult of noise and action and light had stupefied him.

Just at this moment a heavy spear hummed over him.

Who had thrown it ?

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Batouala.

But, the space of the flicker of an eyelash before, he had thrown himself flat on one side, to avoid the panther which came bounding towards him.

When he got up, still trembling all over, the great yellow cat was vanishing, growling furiously.

In contrast, there, quite close, lay Batouala, the *mokoundji*, choking as he breathed, surrounded by a crowd of *m'bis* and *n'gapous*.

The panther, annoyed by that *sagaie* which it had seen coming—and which was, however, not aimed at it—had ripped open his belly with a stroke of its paw as it passed.

CHAPTER TWELVE

BATOUALA was rattling gently as he breathed.

He had been like this for a fortnight. From morning till evening, from evening till morning, he lay on his *bogbo* and cried or groaned without stopping.

A continual fever gnawed his bones, beat upon his temples, burned his body, and made him call from time to time :

“ A drink ! . . . Give me a drink ! . . . ”

Having taken the drink, he would immediately vomit it all up, panting with pain, and fall back on to his *bogbo*. But to-day there was no vomiting and no fever. Batouala cried no more. He poured with cold sweat. He hardly stirred.

Instead of moaning and complaining, he talked, and talked, and talked, only stopping when the vibration of a rattle fretted his throat.

A few more moments, perhaps a night, at the very most a night and a day, and

BATOUALA

Batouala, the great *mokoundji*, will be no more than a traveller.

His eyes for ever shut, he will set off for the dark village from which there is no way back. There he will join his *baba* again, and all his ancestors who had gone before him.

There, you no longer see the *Pombo* or the *Bamba*. You no longer find familiar heights and valleys. You have no longer to scorn the whites. You have no longer to obey them. You can no longer quarrel with so-and-so about women. Songs and dances do not last for ever. After the dry season comes the season of rain. Man only lives for a moment. And there was the tangible proof of this truth. For it was all up with Batouala. For soon he was going to die. For, that evening, this great delirium following on over-exertion was indeed the death agony, the *léa-léa*.

Poor Batouala !

And meanwhile, he had been well looked after ! Oh ! Not since after the accident.

It is very true that a wounded man is always interesting, especially when he is called Batouala.

BATOUALA

Agreed !

But ought one to neglect a herd of *gogonas* lowing within *sagaie*-cast for the sake of a wounded man ?

Not that, oh, no !

That is why they had left Batouala rolled in a blanket and in the shade of a tree under the care of Djouma, his dog, in order to run after wild cattle.

A little later they busied themselves with him.

N'gakoura ! What a bore to go to the *Bamba*, instead of staying behind to guzzle with friends !

He had been laid on a stretcher. Four men bearing torches headed the procession. These torches pierced the darkness with a smoky brightness, and were followed by the stretcher-bearers, four *m'bis*, and the rearguard, four more men carrying torches.

Bissibingui and Djouma brought up the rear.

What a slow march ! What a heavy march ! What a slow, dull, and dragging march !

Nocturnal smells, fire-flies, flapping wings, dew, fires taking a long time to go out—

BATOUALA

to left and right ; they saw, heard, and passed all these things.

And the silence !

From time to time one of the groups of torch-bearers relieved the stretcher-bearers.

All were equally silent. They must not go either too fast or too slowly. They must not stumble, or make abrupt movements. The least jolt, and Batouala would howl like a *voungba* which is being bled to death. If N'gakoura heard nothing, it was either because he was kind or because his deafness was incurable.

They had followed the bank of the *Goubadjia*, climbed the chain of humps which hang over the *Baidou*, and clambered up the range of the *Biga Kaga*, whose belly holds transparent violet pebbles which the *boundjous* say are precious. They had reached the village of *Debalé* where the cool waters of the *Kavala* flow.

There, a rest. Time to eat and drink. Then on once more.

A river : the *Bouapata*. Farther on, to the right, in the direction of *Grimari*, another river : the *Yoko'mba*. Then, in quick succession, the *Yako*, and its tributary,

BATOUALA

the *Talé'mbé*. A last march : the *Patakala*.

Then come lands on which were planted millet, maize, sesame, beans, pistachio-nuts, *go'mbos*, potatoes, etc. . . .

Halt ! Here is the *mokoundji's* hut.

You are before your hut, Batouala.

The whites have their *doctorros*, the niggers their sorcerers. Be sure that they are very much alike, and that the latter are worth more than the former.

There are good *doctorros* and bad sorcerers. There are bad *doctorros* and good sorcerers.

But, whatever happens, the sorcerer's commands must be carried out before all else.

Thus, there had been spread out in front of Batouala's hut, according to the direction of the sorcerers, the magic horrors, the sweet-smelling bags, the amulets which guard against evil eye, and the bells and tambourines which strike terror into evil spirits and drive them away, all upon a little square witch's carpet.

But as the evil spirits hesitated to vanish in spite of all this, the chanters and the *go'nga* players came to awaken Batouala.

B A T O U A L A

Alas ! it was in vain that they made his hut re-echo with the most fearful howls and the most frightful *tam-tams*, for the sickness remained master. An evil spirit tortured his wasted body. It was no longer worth while squeezing his belly tight with a rope ! Had not Do'ndorro passed the limits which they had wished to set for him by that means ?

Moreover, the decay of the belly spread from day to day. The flies which frequent dead bodies, and the fat blue, green, and black *roumas* swarmed over the putrefied and running sore which it offered them.

Nothing could repulse the attacks of Do'ndorro, neither washing with hot or cold water, nor exorcisms, nor the application of certain healing herbs, pounded with spittle, nor the plasters of cow-dung, nor the cauterization with red-hot iron.

Djouma himself, disheartened by the stench of the wound, licked it no longer.

He had fulfilled all the duties of a dog. What more could he do, since there was nothing to do ?

In desperation, the Commandant was consulted about the case.

BATOUALA

The Commandant showed amiability and charm. To the requests for advice, he replied, in a joyous tone of voice, that Batouala might well die, and all the *m'bis* with him.

From that moment, exorcisms, incantations, and amulets were renounced. Renounced were the bags of sweet-smelling herbs, the sorcerer's medicines, the customary charms. Gone were the *go'nga*-players! Departed were the chanting women! Batouala could die. Already he was being robbed of his belongings.

Be happy, Batoula! Your agony is not useless. It has restored memory to a crowd of people to whom you owed heaps of things which you had forgotten!

The millet from your granaries has been shared, your flocks and herds pillaged, your arms stolen. It is very just that your wives have not yet been stolen. But reassure yourself. Their lot is fixed. They have been engaged for a long time! . . .

Batouala rattled gently.

What was he dreaming of? Was he only dreaming? Did he know that that evening there was hardly a soul left near him in his hut?

BATOUALA

Since he was delirious, since he was rattling, no, he could not know that, with the exception of Djouma, Bissibingui, and Yassiguindja, every one had abandoned him, even his headmen, even his near relations, even his wives, and the children he had had by them.

Then he did not know that Bissibingui and Yassiguindja were there, in his hut, separated by that fire, which no longer warmed him; him, Batouala. He did not know that Djouma, the little ginger dog, was snoring curled up on the rubber baskets, over there. And when Bissibingui took Yassiguindja violently in his arms, he did not even hear the goats bleat, or the ducks go pcha-pchapcha, pchapchapcha, their necks stretched curiously towards this noise, unusual to them.

He raved.

Once more, in his delirium, he said everything with which he had to reproach the whites—lying, cruelty, illogical behaviour, and hypocrisy.

There were neither *Bandas* nor *mandjas*, whites nor niggers. There were only men. And all men were brothers.

BATOUALA

It was wrong to rob, or beat one's neighbour. War and cruelty were one and the same. And here the niggers were forced to take part in the savage deeds of the whites, and to go and get themselves killed for them in distant quarrels! And those who protested were hanged, or strangled, or thrown into prison!

Go, dirty nigger! Go, and die! . . .

A long silence.

Djouma came to sniff at his master.

What had Djouma felt, though? What had warned him that the end was near? Did he want to hear more nearly the voice of him whom he had possibly mourned in his dark soul? Had the old instinct surged up in him, that instinct which urges the animals, when one of them is dying, to put a truce to all quarrels and to part the grass with anxious muzzle in the direction in which they suppose the Unknown to be?

No one knows. Anyhow, a moment afterwards he lay down with a surly air, his chin on his forepaws, and his back to the fire.

Yassiguindja and Bissibingui had jerked up their heads and looked at Batouala.

BATOUALA

“ *Kouzou* ? ” she asked. “ Is he dead ? ”

“ No. Not yet,” he replied.

And they smiled at each other.

They had understood each other. Alone in the world, and masters of their destiny, nothing and nobody could prevent them any longer from belonging to each other.

Batouala hiccoughed, his nostrils pinched.

The sweetness of life, at this most wonderful moment of all ! Bissibingui drew near to Yassiguindja and drew her into his arms, bent her willingly to his embrace, took complete possession of her. . . .

Batouala, it is quite useless for you to go on obstinately wishing not to die ! They alone exist, do you see ! They have suppressed you—yes, you ! You do not count any more for them.

But why does your hiccoughing stop ?

Ah ! Your eyes are opening, your eyes are open, and you, you, who are out from your coverings, hideously wasted, are getting up !

You advance, tottering, your arms outstretched, like a child learning to walk !

Where are you going ? Towards Bissi-

BATOUALA

bingui and Yassiguindja? Will you be jealous to your last breath, then? Could you not leave them in peace, Batouala, since you are going to die?

They remember no longer where they are! They do not see you, or rather they have not seen you yet. They do not . . .

Look at what you have done! You are happy, are you not? for they have separated and are flattened against the wall, limbs shivering and teeth chattering with terror!

And you, ha! by N'gakoura, finished off by your last effort, killed by yourself, you have fallen flat on the ground as a great tree falls. . . .

The ducks quack at this noise, the chickens cackle, and the goats run in all directions. Djouma growls by force of habit, without opening his eyes. And the white ants for a long, long time fill their galleries with brown earth, rustling continuously. But Yassiguindja and Bis-sibingui have already fled into the night.

Gradually the noises calm down. The animals fall asleep. Nothing but silence

BATOUALA

and solitude is left to watch over you,
Batouala. The great night is over you.
Sleep !

Sleep. . . .

